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Printed in Australia by IVE
Distributed in Australia and NZ by Are Direct
ISSN 0728-441

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"I'M A HUGE DOOM FAN, AND THE DARK AGES IS EXCITING ME GREATLY"

BEN MANSILL

This month
Created PC PowerPlay's own version of the Super Shotgun. Wieldable during magazine print deadlines, it fires schooners of Guinness into thirsty editors' mouths. Refreshing!

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SEE p20

My first experience of *Doom* was playing a shareware version of the groundbreaking 1993 original release. After playing it at home, I then snuck the floppy disc it came on into my high school and played it on the library computers at lunchtime. Golden moments. And, since then, I've never not played a new *Doom* game released on PC.

Simply put, I'm a huge *Doom* fan, and that's why *Doom: The Dark Ages*, is exciting me greatly. This is a game that, in many ways, is returning to its series roots, and doing so in one hell of a bombastically awesome manner.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

CHRIS LIVINGSTON

This month
Flew the USS PCPP to Omicron Persei 8 in order to deliver the latest issue to Emperor Lrrr. Big fan.

JODY MCGREGOR

This month
Protected simple fisher folk by fighting a series of giant crabs in a dark cave. Oh, and in *Solasta 2* he...

IAN EVENDEN

This month
Demanded to be hailed as Emperor Evendenius. Started building the almighty Baths of Ian.

TED LITCHFIELD

This month
Took a week off to go backpacking around the medieval hellscape of Argent D'Nur. Toasty!

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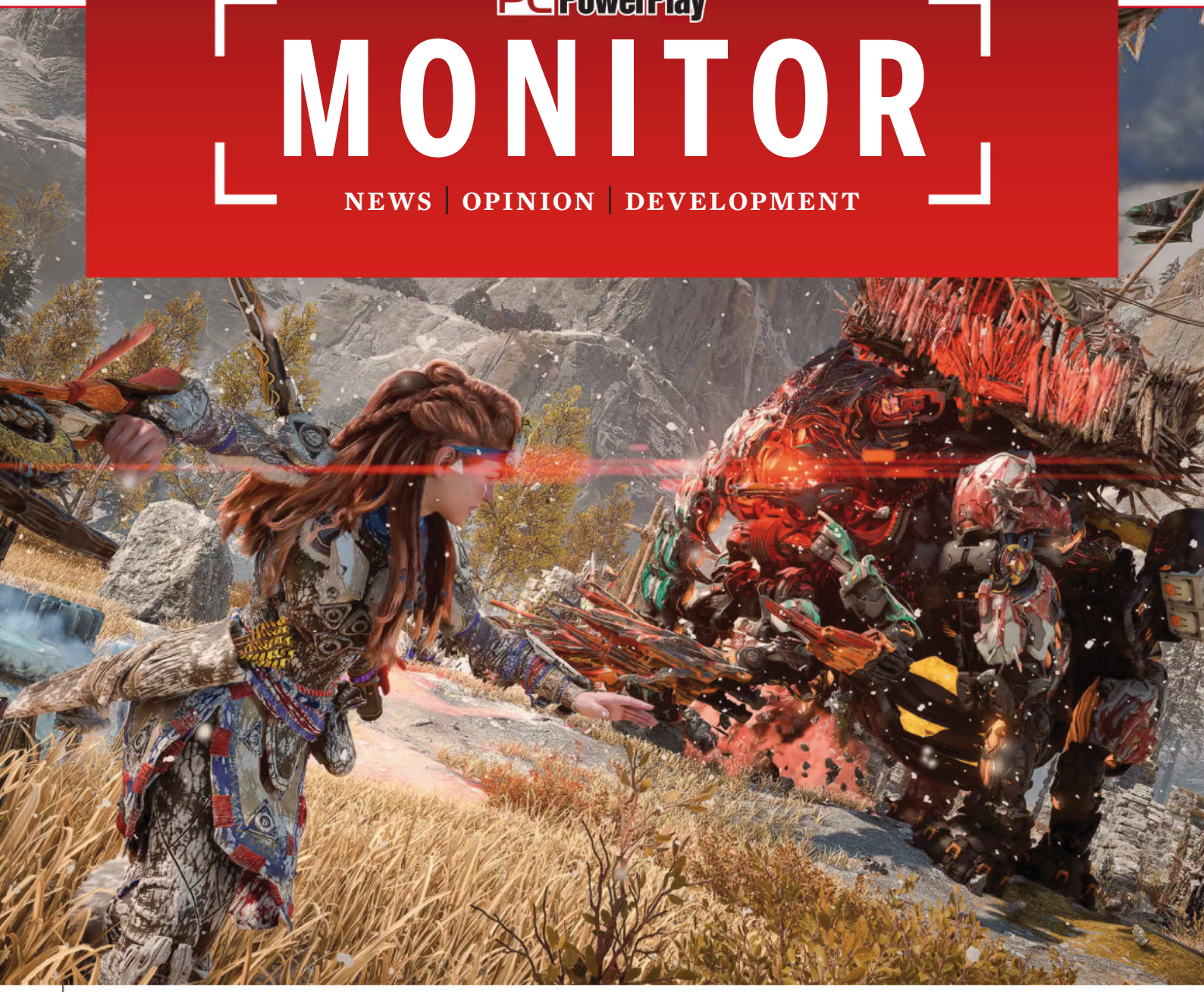

GRABBING CASH

Former PlayStation exec says putting its games on PC is like 'printing money'

It's been a truth for ages: console manufacturers have been missing out by not releasing their games on PC. Microsoft long ago gave up on pure Xbox exclusives, and is even releasing games on PlayStation now. Sony, meanwhile, has tacitly acknowledged the fact for years, steadily releasing its PS4 and PS5 back catalogue onto Steam, and then last year, releasing *Helldivers 2* on both PS5 and PC to enormous success. Now, former Sony executive Shuhei Yoshida has come out and said it explicitly: releasing its games on PC is a licence for Sony to print money.

TOP: Games like *Horizon* have made bank for Sony.

Speaking to Sacred Symbols+ about his time as head of PlayStation Studios, Yoshida explained he wanted to bring Sony games to PC far earlier than when it eventually happened, but it just wasn't the way Sony thought back then. Eventually though, Sony was sold on the idea through a notion that releasing games on PC now might entice players to buy a PlayStation in the future.

YOSHIDA EXPLAINED HE WANTED TO BRING SONY GAMES TO PC FAR EARLIER

"Releasing on PC does many things: it reaches a new audience who do not own consoles – especially in regions where consoles are not as popular," Yoshida said. "The idea is that those people may become fans of a franchise, and when a new game in that series comes out, they may be convinced to purchase a PlayStation."

LOADSAMONEY

It's worked out well for us, but I question whether this argument holds water. PC gamers can be incredibly patient when it comes to playing games on their preferred

HATERS GON HATE

PLAYER HATERS

Prologue is the new game from *PUBG*'s studio, and this survival game doesn't pull any punches. It's punishing, difficult and a little finicky, but Brendan Greene doesn't care if it's not everyone's cup of tea, as long as it "elicits a reaction," because he doesn't want to make easy games. ■ ***EG***

SUPER SIM REALITY

CHASING THAT F1 DREAM

F1 champ Max Verstappen is a big fan of racing sims, racking up countless hours in between race weekends. He also reckons that today's setups are good enough for the experience to be "90% to 95%" of the real thing, so my dreams of being the next F1 star aren't over yet! ■ ***NE***

AIN'T IT, CHIEF

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Pour one out for popular Early Access game *Astrox Imperium*. The solo dev on this 'singleplayer *EVE*' vanished without a trace for a year, only to return out of the blue and announce a personal crisis had taught him he was done with games for good. ■ ***JW***

platform, and since Sony has demonstrated its willingness to put nearly all its exclusives on Steam, PC gamers' response would simply be to continue waiting.

Then again, maybe Sony has access to data that suggests otherwise. In any case, Yoshida also noted that it's an easy way for the publisher to generate extra revenue, stating, "Porting to PC is way cheaper than creating an original title. So it's almost like printing money. And that helps us to invest in new titles now that the cost of games has increased."

Another factor that swayed Sony to release its games on PC is China, with Yoshida observing that, "China is a huge PC game market," and that, "In order to reach the audience in countries like China then it's crucial to release on PC." China recently demonstrated its potential to catapult games to huge success, with almost 90% of *Black Myth: Wukong*'s massive sales generated domestically.

So there you have it: console game + PC launch = profit. Yoshida has been dishing all manner of Sony-related details since leaving PlayStation. Last month, he theorised that the reason *Bloodborne* hasn't arrived on PC is because Hidetaka Miyazaki would prefer to do the port himself, and that if he personally would have "tried to resist" Sony's push toward live-service games. ■

Rick Lane

TOP: Ellie reacts incredulously to Sony's PC port delays (probably).

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

A literal high

Steam cracked 40 million concurrent users for the first time.

Cold, hard cash

A Good Snowman Is Hard To Build has adopted a new pricing strategy: whatever the current temperature in London, that's its price in US dollars.

Hell house freezes

Dragon Quest 3 HD-2D Remake sold enough to make execs happy.

At the last hurdle

After 14 years of operation, indie developer Studio Fizbin is closing.

Pilfered

Horror game *The Backrooms 1998* had a good launch on Steam. So good that someone stole the entire game and uploaded it to the Nintendo eShop without permission.

Cookie clicker

A 2023 study concluded CAPTCHAs are "a tracking cookie farm for profit masquerading as a security service".

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

As the Great Wheel turns, The Spy sits with the gods, mulling over the fates of PC gaming throughout the cosmos.

"When shall Lord Gaben ascend from his cherished Hall of Knives to join us?" Abydon the forge god asks, "For I grow impatient to question him about the game the mortals call *Half-Life 3*."

"Yes," rasps Skaen, god of secret hatred and resentment, "I am sick of his procrastinations. It is clear he has no love for us or the PC gamers who, loyally like rats protecting their brood mother, have followed the story of the *Half-Life 3* blind in hope for decades. He dishonours us all with his inaction." Wael, god of dreams, places down the copy of PC PowerPlay magazine that the deity is reading with its many eyes, and says, "A Gordon with a gravity gun, in a vision once I saw, it was a scientist sworn, and with the gravity gun play'd, a game of Borealis in the fade".

"I feel *Half-Life 3* tap, tap, tapping on the door of my realm," whispers Berath, god of death, "its carcass is already picked clean by PC gamers who, in their insatiable desire for more of the being known as G-Man, have consumed its very essence. The meagre scraps of *Half-Life 3*'s destiny, thrown to the world by Lord Gaben, have been ravenously feasted upon, but all to no avail. *Half-Life 3* is no more, unmade, and soon shall slumber with me, awaiting the turning of the Great Wheel until a new PC gaming age is upon us."

DEUS EX LUDUS

"Speak but a word of command and I will hunt Lord Gaben down with my beasts. Their savage breath on his neck will soon rouse him from his blade sharpening!" calls out Galawain, god of the hunt. "Yes!" concurs Magran with a booming voice, "and when captured I will hold his feet to the fire and burn PC gamers' desire into them! This Lord Gaben is nothing to my war machine!"

"Silence my heavenly brothers and sisters," Ondra, the god of water and the moon soothes, for all things will come to pass, eventually. Have we not already seen the heritage of the *Half-Life 3* woven, like a mother's needle in her babe's tapestry, into the very fabric of PC gaming? There have been many games, bestowed to the mortals, that followed upon this sacred legacy.

"It is true," Eothas, the god's eyes burning star bright with the light of eternity, says. "I have come to know their existence in PC PowerPlay magazine. Still, I hold out hope that *Half-Life 3* will know of the miracle of rebirth, and that Lord Gaben can transcend to our realm, completing his act of redemption."

SPEAK BUT A WORD OF COMMAND AND I WILL HUNT LORD GABEN DOWN

Upon this, Woedica, the god of law, memory and rightful rulership, steps forward. Her terrible visage is ethereally lit by the infinite souls of PC gamers who, like fireflies, stream hither and thither around the gods' witenagemot, waiting for a chance to be reborn again. Woedica then whispers with steel laced throughout every sinew, "and if Lord Gaben does not bow to his redemption, thereby joining us in the PC gaming pantheon, then I shall have my vengeance". Turning, Hylea, god of the sky, asks, "How so, sacred Oathbinder?" Then, eyes gleaming with a malicious taint, Woedica states, "For I shall see him reborn in his next life as a console gamer." Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY
The Spy spends hazy late summer days smoking a pipe with Edér.

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ONE MORE ROUND

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 REVO resurrects a fighting game legend

What is a legacy? I've struggled with that question as I've tried to write about *Virtua Fighter 5 REVO*, the latest entry in the series that invented 3D fighting games before eventually fading from the public consciousness. *REVO*, a new version that hit Steam in late January, is a chance for one of the most beloved fighting games ever made to find a new worldwide audience.

The first thing you have to understand about *Virtua Fighter 5* is that it's old. The original game released in Japanese arcades in 2006, a year after the Xbox 360 launched; *Halo 3* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* were still a year away, *Street Fighter IV* was two years out and Apple's App Store didn't yet exist.

"It's hard to describe the feeling to someone who's never played it before because it's not flashy like a *Tekken* or *Soulcalibur* or even *Dead or Alive*, but everything about the fighting system just clicks," says domaug, a competition player since 2001's *Virtua Fighter 4*. "It's like you're watching a kung-fu movie unfold in front of you. I think why it's survived this long is because its fluid fighting system hooked its players, never letting go. It's a fighting game that's truly unique; no other fighting game 'feels' like *Virtua Fighter*."

Commentator Lawrence 'WingedRegent' Maldonado describes the series this way: "*Virtua Fighter* is a lot more grounded ... if a game like *Tekken* or *Soulcalibur* or even *Dead or Alive* is your favourite shonen anime, then I would say *Virtua Fighter* is your favourite martial arts movie." Nicely put.

SETTING THE STAGE

Cory 'Virtua Kazama' Mewborn reminds me that *Virtua Fighter*'s reputation for cutting-edge tech isn't just down to pioneering the 3D fighter in 1993. "*Virtua Fighter* has always been the blueprint for the 3D fighting game because it always makes itself into something brand-new," he said. Mewborn has been active in the scene since 2010 and organises tournaments in addition to competing and commentating. Considering how long it's been since the series has seen a new entry, its diehard players have had plenty of time to brush up on their history.

"*Virtua Fighter 2* gave us motion capture for the very first time," he says. "*Virtua Fighter 3* gave us environments [with stairs and slopes] and eye tracking. *Virtua Fighter 4* gave us sabakis, which is basically an attack with reflective properties."

REVO isn't cutting-edge. It's still, at its heart, a revision of a game that is nearly 20 years old. But it is the first time the series has appeared on PC since some ancient

Like a Dragon

Virtua Fighter was originally created by Yu Suzuki's Sega AM2, which is known for games like *OutRun*, *Virtua Cop*, *Virtua Striker*, *Daytona USA*, and *Shenmue*. *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown* and *REVO* were developed by *Like a Dragon*'s Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, who will also be helming the upcoming *Virtua Fighter 6*. Those are big shoes to fill.

FAR LEFT: *Virtua Fighter* is simple to pick up and play, but hard to master.

LEFT: *REVO* plays real matches played by other players from around the world on the title screen. You don't need to go far to learn new tricks.

READY? GO! *Understanding the storied history of Virtua Fighter 5*

2006 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5
Virtua Fighter 5 releases in Japanese arcades. As of 2025, ten versions of *Virtua Fighter 5* have released in arcades.

2007 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 ONLINE
Virtua Fighter 5 releases in arcades and on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. Only the Xbox 360 version supports online play.

2010 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5: FINAL SHOWDOWN
Final Showdown releases in Japanese arcades and on 360 and PS3 in 2012.

2021 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5: ULTIMATE SHOWDOWN
Final Showdown is remade on the Dragon Engine and releases on modern consoles.

Windows 95 ports; it also marks the first time the series will have rollback netcode, a genre staple that has made playing with other players around the world possible without major drawbacks. I've only ever had excellent matches on it since launch. But this is about more than a netcode solution: it means that a community that has previously been segregated by regions and different game versions can finally play together.

"Even with *Virtua Fighter 5: Ultimate Showdown*, when that came out, there was ... the global version of the game, and then there was *Virtua Fighter* eSports, which was the Japanese version of the game that was on arcade and PS4, and those two player bases could not interact," Maldonado explained, "With *Virtua Fighter 5: REVO*, that last remaining sort of border has eroded, and now players can just finally reach out and play with each other across the world."

IT'S A HUGE WIN FOR A COMMUNITY THAT HAS SURVIVED ON SHEER LOVE

It's a huge win for a community that has survived, in many ways, on sheer love and force of will. And that's saying something for a corner of the already fiercely loyal and protective FGC. *Virtua Fighter*'s community hosts tournaments and locals, runs Discord servers, and generally tries to welcome new players while reminding Sega that the series is beloved outside of Japan.

OFF THE MAT

"The gameplay is still *Virtua Fighter 5: Final Showdown*, but the balance patch was what made a difference because there were moves that we never thought we would see again," said Mewborn. "There's some moves, some throws, that were taken out. It really made us rethink how to play our characters that we know and love."

Rediscovering how things work means *REVO* has the ability to surprise even series veterans. "It's a trippy experience," said Maldonado. "Even people who've been playing since *VF5: FS* in 2010, even in the arcades, they're now learning new things about their characters after not having had a new thing to discover for 14 years."

And Sega is listening to fan feedback. The community discovered, for instance, that a change to one of monkey-style kung-fu specialist Eileen's moves could produce a pseudo-infinite because of an added stagger effect on normal hits, but Sega quickly fixed it. It's hard to overstate how much goodwill a quick response like that builds.

Virtua Fighter 5: REVO is resurrection. A chance for one of the greatest, longest-enduring fighting games and its community to get a shot at rebirth before the release of *Virtua Fighter 6* from the same team that develops *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*.

If you're part of the FGC, you have that fighting game that defines you, that, to quote Mewborn, "Will stick with you no matter what." *Virtua Fighter*'s community continued to believe in it when nobody else did, and their faith has been rewarded. If the *Virtua Fighter* community has a message to new players, it's that they want you to enjoy *Virtua Fighter* as much as they have. What's a legacy? Maybe it's as simple as that. ■

Will Borger

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Turn-based RPG with lush UE5 graphics.

FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES

RELEASE April 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** SNK

A legendary versus fighting series returns with a sequel to the 1999 classic, *Garou: Mark of the Wolves*. Fight in the iconic world of South Town with a day one PC release.

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE May 15, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living super weapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. There's a throwable Shield Saw!

2 months

ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

RELEASE May 30, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware

The out of left-field *Elden Ring* spin-off sees the action RPG transformed into a wild new co-op roguelike RPG. Expect fast runs and the series' typically epic bosses.

STELLAR BLADE

RELEASE June 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Shift Up Corporation

The stunning action-RPG that was a smash hit as a PlayStation 5 exclusive gets ported to PC. Expect insane combat, crazy super moves, and giant bosses.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

3 months

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

Snake returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to an UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.

MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13

Uncover the origins of Italy's mafia in a gritty mob story set in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. A visually rich new cinematic third-person action-adventure.

JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?

4 months+

BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The famous mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action.

CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action adventure set in the same universe as popular MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the beautiful yet brutal continent of Pywel.

SPLITGATE 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** 1047 Games

If you wanted to know what would happen if you smashed *Unreal Tournament*, *Halo* and *Portal* together, then *Splitgate 2* answers that. Frenetic shooting action.

MOD

AVOWED MAGIC

Is *Avowed* running poorly on your rig right now? Luckily, a talented modder has already stepped in to help, releasing the *Optimised Tweaks AVD* mod that improves loading times and framerates, while also reducing stutter. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/r4dk5tfa

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
May 2025	MercurySteam	505 Games	store.epicgames.com

BLADES OF FIRE

Mettle meets metal in this action-adventure romp

Steel yourselves, MercurySteam is back and looking to forge its own fantasy Soulslike with a molten twist. Every weapon you use to clobber enemies with will be crafted by your own hands – you'll need to master blacksmithing and battle. I got hands on with this curious fantasy adventure as well as a chance to chat to the studio's CEO and *Blades of Fire* game director Enric Alvarez at a recent press event about all things fighting and forging.

Set in a world where a curse turns all steel to stone, Queen Neera rules all with her metal might. With an army of abominations that are the only ones able to wield decent weapons at her side, she stands unopposed. Step in Aaran De Lira – our hero and protagonist who has been gifted with a godly hammer that can forge steel. It's up to him and scholarly sidekick Adso to step up and kill the Queen.

Blades of Fire feels a lot like a cross between *God of War* and a Soulslike. You have a vast world full of secrets and hidden paths to explore while being beset by enemies ranging from classic armoured soldiers to goblin-like creatures that hop around on swords like pogo sticks. As Aran you'll explore to learn more about forging and how to get yourself closer to the Queen, meeting a cast of strange characters including a stout grandma and troll-thing that's mostly chin. Aran and Adso feel like a similar pairing to Kratos and Atreus at first glance, but with a little more wisecracking and a more equal footing. I'm curious to see how their relationship develops.

BLADES OF FIRE IS SET IN A WORLD WHERE A CURSE TURNS ALL STEEL TO STONE

Combat feels heavy and centres on switching weapon types to match your opponents', with each blade type changing your style. Swords let you get in close and react more quickly, while hammers will knock enemies flat but leave you more open to attacks. It's not quite as finely tuned as a *Souls* game, but you can really feel the impact of each blow. Just don't let Alvarez hear you make those correlations.

"I don't like comparisons," he tells me at a recent press event for the game. "That's something for the people to say or to feel. We took some elements from the genre – like the anvils, for example, that serve to save your progress that you can find in other games like the *Souls* Saga – but our combat has little to do with the *Souls* saga."

Instead *Blades of Fire* is more of a homecoming and returning to the studio's roots. "If you want a [game] reference, the founders of MercurySteam – before creating the studio – were all involved in a game called *Blade of Darkness* published by Codemasters," he says. "So for us, *Blades of Fire* has been like closing a circle. Or getting back to those times when we were young and had our first experiences. I think that we found ourselves many times discussing ideas and concepts we already discussed 20 years ago. I'm talking about 2001, when that game was released. We wanted to go back to this kind of medieval fantasy, sword fighting, tactical game. Then we took our chance and together we're here today."

PLAYED IT

You can definitely feel those influences from *Blade of Darkness*, not only in the name but in *Fire*'s world and mechanics. It's often cited as one of the origins of the Soulslike genre so it really has come full circle and refined all of those early ideas. The game's beefy protagonist and overall design also remind me of the Xbox 360 era of games – and I mean that in a complimentary way. There's something nostalgic about it, with a big nod to the past under a modern sheen that helps tie it all together.

"A year-and-a-half ago, the game was a lot of pieces scattered around," Alvarez continues. "Then everything came together. Game development is not about an incredible engine, graphics or story, it's about putting everything together, because when you do that, the first thing that happens is that everything explodes. And you need to iterate that process until death, essentially. Until you have a solid experience for the players.

"It clicked when a few things – the forge, the combat, the economy, and the exploration – were consistently put together. That was like almost a revelation. Because before that, all the pieces were scattered. We had nice exploration, nice levels, etc, but it's not until you make them consistent with each other, that you can start playing and feel there's a game."

DOUBLE ACT

I got to play a few hours from the start of Aran and Adso's adventure as they cut their way through a town to learn more about forging and get closer to the Queen's stronghold. The area had a Norse influence to the buildings, and hid lots of secret paths and items. Every now and then you find an anvil to rest at that works similarly to bonfires in *Souls* games. You can rest here and respawn enemies or head to the forge to craft new equipment. You'll also revive here if you die, and you'll definitely be doing plenty of that. Most common enemies don't pose a threat on their own, but you'll often find them in groups. Thankfully switching weapons is quick so you can go from using a polearm for crowd control to getting in close with a sword for the final strike. Although you'll need to be wary of your surroundings – if you're in a narrow space you won't be able to swing a hammer around your head.

The giant goblin-like boss I faced proved a bit more challenging as it could petrify and regenerate itself, but it was satisfying to lop off its arm while dazed and finally wear it down. Dodging felt a little slow, though I couldn't quite tell if that was because of Aran's general speed or because my weapons were too heavy. There is a parry system if you time a guard just right, and you have to be aware of your stamina at all times. I did drop the difficulty down for it though, so I could push through and see more of the game, and with three difficulty settings there's plenty of scope for challenge as well as easier ride for those that like the look of the Soulslike genre but maybe don't have the patience for it. *Blades of Fire* will hopefully pan out to be a great way to get into that type of action-heavy fantasy game.

THE FORGE IS WHERE ALL THE STEEL-BASED MAGIC OF THE GAME HAPPENS

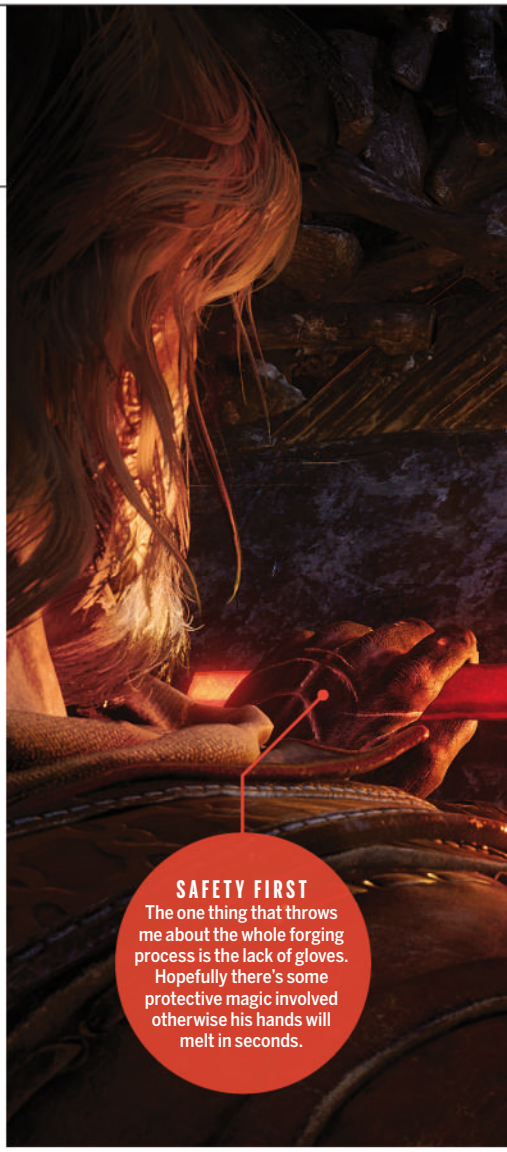
While fighting is how you'll spend most of your time, forging weapons is also crucial. Surprisingly that aspect of the game didn't come into being until later in the process. "The premise of the game was the steel turning into stone," Alvarez tells me. "If you have that premise, it becomes a necessity to forge your own weapons because there's no other weapons in the game because they've turned into stone. So very conveniently we put a magic hammer into the main character's hands that is able to forge steel that does not turn into stone despite the Queen's spell.

"So I think that one thing led to another very quickly. Based on that simple premise, we created both the narrative and the gameplay at a very basic level. And then we started getting into the reality of, 'Alright, we want to forge,' so we want the player's decisions and skill to have everything to do with the weapon's performance and how you play and allow the player to decide what gear they want for swords, hammers, etc. And this is how it started – the forge became necessary to tell the story."

HOT METAL

The forge is where all the steel-based magic of the game happens. *Blades of Fire*'s weapon making goes beyond most crafting elements in games by having a much more in depth process. Not only will you need to pick materials to make your blades, you'll need to pick them for each part of it. Everything from the shape of the cutting edge down to the hilt is customisable and your choices will affect your weapons' stats.

Once you pick everything you want you'll then need to hammer the metal into shape. You're given a chalk line of what shape it should be while your lump of metal sits underneath – you need to angle hammer strikes to temper it towards the shape it should be. It looks complex at first glance, but the fine-tuning of it becomes addictive as you twist the sticks to pick your angles and



SAFETY FIRST
The one thing that throws me about the whole forging process is the lack of gloves. Hopefully there's some protective magic involved otherwise his hands will melt in seconds.

You'll need to shift weapons and fighting styles for each fight.

HOT STUFF
Sure, the metal may be just a lump now, but a few bashes and you'll be able to shape it like clay. Really stubborn, hard clay.

HAMMER TIME
The smithing tool Aran picks up is one of seven legendary hammers that helped forge the world and humanity so making swords should be pretty easy with it.

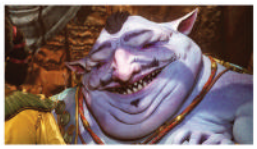
FAR LEFT: Adso's scholarly pursuits come in handy when researching the best ways to cut enemies down.

LEFT: Tentacles or tubing? You decide!

Blades of Fire

RIGHT: *Dark Souls* says hi.

BELOW: He doesn't like it when you touch his flowers.



strength of blows. Once you find the rhythm to it, it all comes together. Hard, precise hits will move a lot of metal in a small area, while lighter, broader hits will smooth things out in the direction you want. Do it well and you'll have a high quality weapon to show for it.

MercurySteam has done an amazing job replicating the feel of forging metal, but it wasn't an easy process to get to this point. "So I think that the fact that we have a forge in the core of the experience was the biggest challenge we faced in the development," Alvarez shares. "In short, it was hell on Earth!

"It was very challenging because we had no references – I think it's the first game that I know that goes that deep into forging. Every step forward was followed by two steps backward. And this is how we developed, because we took great care of several aspects of the forge. Possibly the most important ones are, alright, the forge is a central concept, but this is not a forge simulator, and we don't want to make it one. This is an action-adventure game, so we can't have the players stuck here. And we need to develop mechanics that are interesting – that allow you to express your creativity – but at the same time that are quick. You can't get stranded in the forge.

"That was the first aspect. And then, equally important, at a different level, we wanted to give the experience of a very physical forge process. We wanted you to really feel you are shaping the billet into the weapon you decided you want to forge. So I think that these are essentially the two most important aspects."

While there are a lot of fantasy, *Souls* games wannabes out there right now hoping to ride out on the genre's current popularity, *Blades of Fire*'s forging aspect helps it stand out. It turns the game from yet another action-adventure fantasy into something unique to be excited for. It's surprisingly tactical as your choices determine stats such as slashing damage vs piercing. You can't make anything overpowered right off the bat – you'll need to explore and find more materials to make stronger blades – but I'm curious to see just how far the system can be pushed further into it. All the min-maxing fans out there will no doubt have a field day with it.

MAKING SURE THE STUDIO KEEPS THAT INDEPENDENCE IS PART OF ITS CORE IDENTITY

SUITS YOU

MercurySteam has always prided itself as an independent studio, even when working on other series such as *Castlevania* with the *Lords of Shadow* games. A large part of that is using it own engine and *Blades of Fire* is no different. It's also been made using the same tech.

"It is very convenient for us because it's like a tailor-made suit," Alvarez tells us when talking about the MercurySteam engine. "You're using an engine that's only reason to exist is to serve the game we're making. We only develop what we need – the systems we need – to our best. And this gives us total control in order to get a good frame rate and also a nice visual quality. So working with our own technology is something we always did – it's second nature to us, and it's a valuable asset of the studio."

Making sure the studio keeps that independence, especially in the face of difficulties and widespread layoffs within the gaming industry, is part of the studio's core identity. "Well, [working in the industry] is always complicated for one reason or another," Alvarez tells us. "Twenty years ago, it was complicated for totally different reasons. In our case, it was very difficult to present ourselves to the industry – it was very difficult for publishers to pay attention to what we had to say or had to do. Ten years ago, it was a different thing, and a few years ago, it was COVID. And now the situation is not exactly the best possible one... as an independent studio, you are always on the edge. And that's maybe what explains the existence of *Blades of Fire* – because we feel that if we are able to fly with our own wings, we own a big part of our destiny.

"If you rely solely on third parties, anything might happen. But if you manage to create a new IP and it resonates and people like it, then you are motivated to continue doing it and you are the owner of your own destiny."

It seems a lot is resting on *Blades of Fire*'s shoulders, luckily hero Aran and his forging escapades seem broad enough to carry that burden. The fantasy setting and Soulslike combat might not be pushing any boundaries, but the basic loop and forging mechanics are sturdy in their own right. Here's hoping it can carry that momentum through the full game when it launches in May later this year.

Daniella Lucas

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2025	Keepsake Games	Keepsake Games	keepsake.games

JUMP SHIP

Blast off in this four-player mission-based co-op

My favourite co-op game of the past decade is *Sea of Thieves*: I love sailing a galleon into dangerous territory with friends, engaging in ship-to-ship and person-to-person (or skeleton) combat, then scampering off with loot. A game like *Sea of Thieves*, but in space? I'll definitely give it a try.

Jump Ship is a mission-based co-op FPS from Keepsake Games where you and up to three other crew members pilot a spaceship, engage in ship-to-ship battles and first-person combat, and salvage gear and goodies you can use to upgrade your ship. I recently got to try a hands-on preview, joined by PC PowerPlay's answer to Han Solo: Morgan Park. (I'm not sure if that makes me Luke or Chewbacca. Whoever has the worst aim, I guess.)

PLAYED IT

To be clear, *Jump Ship* isn't exactly *Sea of Thieves* in space. First off, it's a PvE-only game, so it doesn't have the unpredictability of other players showing up and trying to score your loot. And while *Sea of Thieves* is completely open world, *Jump Ship* is mission-based: you take a mission, then warp into a section of space to complete it.

But there's still quite a lot in common with Rare's pirate sandbox. One player can pilot the ship while another operates the weapons, and when you take damage someone can run around putting out fires. It's also tactile in a way I appreciate: a lot of lootable items, like scrap metal and ship modules, have to be carried in both hands, so while you're lugging something around you have to drop it if you want to use a weapon. It makes the loot you deal with feel like real objects that need to be physically moved around, carried, and stored on shelves, rather than things that just exist as icons in an inventory slot.

ONE PLAYER CAN PILOT THE SHIP WHILE ANOTHER OPERATES THE WEAPONS

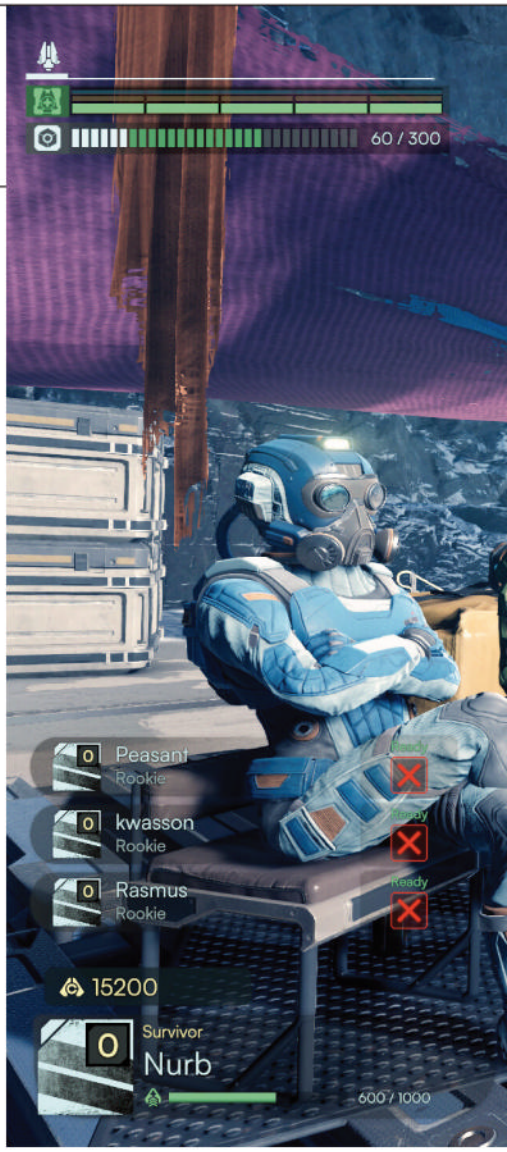
LABOUR INTENSIVE

It also makes the business of scavenging a shipwreck labour intensive, in a good way. One of our missions was to investigate and loot a wrecked ship drifting in space. After manually piloting our ship to the derelict vessel, we popped open our airlock and had to make several trips to collect everything, using our jet packs and grappling hooks to zip back and forth between the two hulls as fast as possible. If a threat appeared, like an enemy ship spotting us or a turret on a nearby asteroid activating, it was a scramble to get back aboard and to battle stations before our ship got completely destroyed. That led to some comedy, too: at one point Morgan jumped into the pilot's seat and flew off in our ship while I was still hovering clumsily outside trying to find a damn airlock while holding a pile of scrap metal.

The ship itself is the best part of the game. It feels like a mobile base you can upgrade and tinker with, and we had to work hard to keep it in shape. When we got blasted by an enemy spacecraft, we'd sometimes receive a fire warning, so I had to leave the turret controls, grab a fire extinguisher, and run around the ship frantically putting out fires while Morgan continued flying. Dealing with crises on the ship feels hectic and fun as you coordinate with your crewmates about who is going to do what.

I'm definitely interested in playing more of *Jump Ship* when it launches later this year: it was fun with two people and I can only assume it'd be twice as fun with a full crew of four. It's not *Sea of Thieves* in space, but when one player is barrel rolling the ship and blasting away at enemies while the other is scrambling around putting out fires, it definitely has some of those great *Sea of Thieves* vibes. Shiver me space timbers.

Christopher Livingston



ABOVE: Enjoy a beer with your buds between missions.

LEFT: "You now have 15 seconds to comply."

Fellowship

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2025 (early access)	Chief Rebel	Arc Games	playfellowship.com

FELLOWSHIP

This dungeon-only MODA feels like a breezy version of WoW

F*ellowship* offers a tantalising opportunity to MMO fans who don't want to grind: Just bang out some fun dungeons instead. After roughly seven years of development, the game is finally nearing its early access release, and had a popular public playtest during Steam Next Fest.

Fellowship combines a MOBA-like selection of characters that earn abilities and gear and a near-clone of *World of Warcraft*-style dungeon gameplay and aesthetics. If you've ever done Mythic Plus difficulty dungeons in *WoW* and didn't really want to quest or grind out those character levels, or watched in horror as your favourite class became an outcast in the latest season's meta groups, *Fellowship* was made for you.

PLAYED IT

Its dungeons are endlessly scaling, with new features and gear launching in seasons. The higher you go, the more gear and mounts and hero abilities you unlock. I recently played through a *Fellowship* dungeon with community director Hamish Bode, CEO and game director Axel Lindberg, and art director André Boström. As a longtime *WoW* Mythic Plus dungeon runner, I immediately felt at home in *Fellowship*.

The UI looks like *WoW* if you use one of the popular UI mods for that game, and elements from many other mods are baked into the game: a damage meter, interrupt tracking, mouseover healing and the like. *Fellowship* itself doesn't allow mods. "We want to be sure that everyone comes in on an even footing, and that there's not a lot of hidden, obscure, secret things that you need to know to be able to get into it," Lindberg tells me.

THE UI LOOKS LIKE WOW IF YOU USE ONE OF THE POPULAR UI MODS FOR THAT GAME

DUNGEON DASH

Between four-player dungeons, you chill in a stronghold that includes training dummies and a station that allows you to swap gear with the shiny new pieces you've collected in your runs.

Quick Play dungeons take 10-15 minutes, and full Ranked dungeons add a timer and wrap up in 20 to 30. More advanced difficulty levels include new Curses to exploit or avoid, which are reminiscent of *WoW*'s Mythic Plus dungeons' Affixes, and award better gear.

I chose a basic frost mage character named Rime, who had a pretty decent set of builder-spender type instant, channelled and cast-time single-target and AOE abilities that reminded me a bit of a simplified arcane mage from *WoW*.

We jumped into the Ranked Wraithtide Isles dungeon, a nautical-themed adventure with mechanics that would feel familiar to anyone who's played *WoW* in recent years.

That's not to say this game is just another *WoW* ripoff; it feels more like what heavy dungeon-runners in *WoW* might build if they were devs with a metric ton of free time. Many of the mechanics are fresh-but-familiar, the sorts of things you might find in a brand-new *WoW* or *Final Fantasy* patch.

The intriguing hero Tariq, for example, takes a standard melee hack-and-slash character and turns the experience into a rhythm game. You fill up his super-slow, nearly five-second swing timer with three procs or global-cooldown abilities.

Lindberg says Chief Rebel and publisher Arc Games plan to release *Fellowship* as a premium game, with an up-front purchase price and no subscription. Later microtransactions will keep development going, but will be cosmetic items such as mounts.

"The competitive end-game dungeon experience is often locked behind hours of grinding or subscriptions," Bode says. "It's often something that isn't accessible for a lot of people. We wanted to make sure people can get to the fun stuff quick."

Heather Newman

The War Table is where players access the group finding menu.

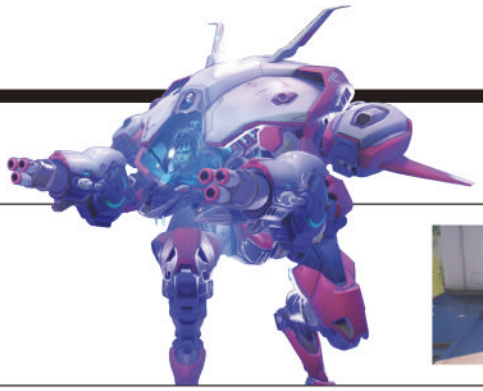
ABOVE: *Fellowship* spell effects are big, sparkly, and always easy to read.

LEFT: Players got a sneak peek of this future demon boss in the Demonbrand Ruins dungeon during Steam Next Fest.

Overwatch 2 Stadium

ABOVE: What if Genji's Dragonblade was a ranged attack? It's possible in Stadium.

RIGHT: The best third-person hero? Unsurprisingly it's Reinhardt.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Available now	Blizzard	Activision-Blizzard	overwatch.blizzard.com

OVERWATCH 2 STADIUM

Stadium mode breaks every rule in the book

I hope I'm not the only one who saw Blizzard's reveal of Stadium, *Overwatch 2*'s big new round-based mode played in third-person, and thought, "Get this nonsense outta here". The FOV shift struck me as a change you'd come up with to make something seem more different than it actually is.

Then I played some Stadium at Blizzard HQ. *Overwatch 2* surely doesn't need a third-person mode, but it does feel surprisingly good. I played some Soldier 76, Mercy and D.Va, and it's safe to say not every hero's behind-the-back camera works equally. Soldier 76 moved as naturally as his *Marvel Rivals* clone, The Punisher, and the higher FOV helped with my decision-making with Mercy. One time as Mercy, the third-person camera even saved my life because I could see a Reaper teleporting behind me.

D.Va felt a bit clunky – her mech is so big that it takes up a lot of the screen (a problem Blizzard never planned for in 2016), and you can't even see her guns firing because of where they're placed. There are some kinks to work out (or not work out, and hope people don't mind), but honestly, after an adjustment period, I wasn't thinking about the camera change. I was just playing *Overwatch 2 Stadium* – a supercharged version of *Overwatch 2* that's far less predictable and kinda broken (in a fun way, so far anyway).

I TACTICALLY MANAGE MY BEAM TARGETS TO PRIORITISE THE BEST HEALING CHAIN

My first round of *Stadium* started with an in-game store sporting tons of icons, concepts, and stats that haven't existed in nine years of *Overwatch*. *Stadium*'s cheapest upgrades modify stats usually exclusive to the domain of MOBA sickos: attack speed, ability power, cooldown reduction, weapon power.

I'm impressed by the variety of items in the store. There's enough going on that the game defaults to a Starter Builds tab for your first few matches, offering two complete builds centred around different playstyles. In my D.Va match, I went all-in on her Defense Matrix and rockets, choosing a power at level 1 that turned D.Va's one defensive ability into a factory that produces more offense, "Fire one rocket for every 50 damage absorbed by D.Va's Defense Matrix."

SHOPPING SPREE

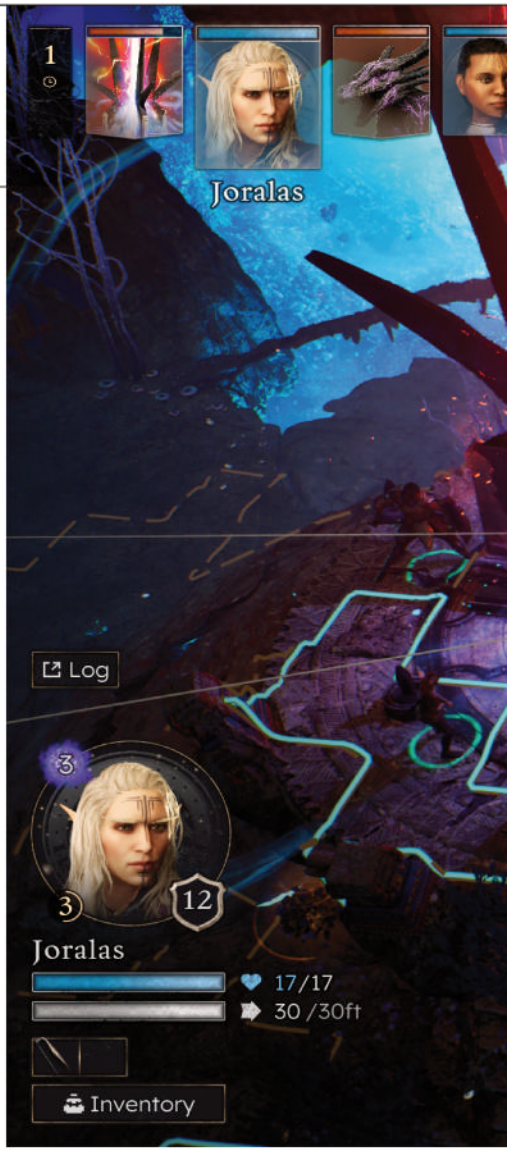
A lot of the store (the official name is the Armory) is upgrades to base stats. The main attractions are each hero's 12 unique powers that significantly boost or modify an ability. D.Va's rocket factory is one power, as is a Solider 76 power I picked up that briefly activates his ultimate every time his secondary attack deals damage. Everyone picks a free power on rounds 1, 3, 5, and 7 if the match goes that long.

PLAYED IT

In my best match, and the one that ultimately won me over on *Stadium*, I followed one of the Mercy starter builds and picked up two really cool abilities: one that grants lifesteal to heroes Mercy boosts with her blue beam, and another that chains her beam to the last two heroes she's healed for a few seconds. I've understood how to play Mercy for nine years, and with just two modifiers that whole script was tossed out the window. Now I had to tactically manage my beam targets to prioritise the best healing chain, and with lifesteal, her blue beam can provide enough healing that I hardly ever had to switch to yellow.

Stadium is immediately fun, but I have no idea if it'll be in my regular rotation a year from now. Either way, I'm just happy that Blizzard is finally taking big swings with *Overwatch 2*. Better late than never. I plan on giving *Stadium* another whirl when it comes to *Overwatch 2* in season 16.

Morgan Park



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2025	Tactical Adventures	Tactical Adventures	solasta-game.com

SOLASTA 2

The homebrew Dungeons & Dragons RPG alternative returns

Larian can afford to make something other than a sequel to *Baldur's Gate III* next. Tactical Adventures, a smaller studio responsible for a game it's probably sick of seeing called 'the other D&D 5E CRPG', has less freedom to subvert expectations. So 2021's *Solasta: Crown of the Magister* is being followed by *Solasta 2* later this year.

The standalone 2.5-hour sidequest demo definitely shows some improvement. The acting's better, and they've got Amelia Tyler from *BGIII* to be the villain (a purple fungus witch called Shadwyn). The faces and hair have improved too, with everyone sporting cool tattoos, though I don't love the elves having moth eyebrows like in *Warcraft*. The character creator's unfortunately off-limits for the demo, which hands me a premade party of four level-three heroes – including a multiclass fighter/cleric. Unlike the original, *Solasta 2* will let us make our own multiclassed abominations.

PLAYED IT

MESS WITH CRABBO

I'm solving the problems of a coastal village, which means settling a disagreement between locals via skill check. The delight I feel seeing a d20 spin across the top of the screen again may be a kind of stolen valour, but I feel it all the same.

Talking to the locals is all prelude before the seafood buffet that awaits in the wilderness, which is a beach and a set of damp caves. My first fights are not with giant rats but giant crabs, and are an underwhelming introduction to *Solasta 2*. The most memorable parts of the original were encounters like a fight with spiders who crawled along the walls of a floating magical library, or with a vampire who countered my light with a zone of darkness. They were 3D battles with verticality. The second time I fight crabs in *Solasta 2*, they prove unable to cross a low barrier in the sand.

ARMED ONLY WITH DAGGERS THEY CHARGE HEADLONG INTO DANGER

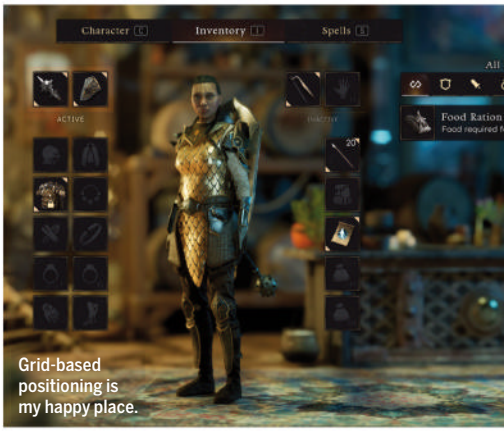
What's more frustrating is that I'm trying to protect some fisherfolk who are apparently suicidal. Armed only with daggers they charge headlong into danger, and even with my paladin alongside I can't save them all.

While the crabs have to be fought, the cave's kobolds are more susceptible to charm and I pass a skill check to win them over. They've been riled up by a cult that's messing with a magical nexus further into the caves, and my next quest is to go and deal with them. The deep caves are cut off by water, however, and I have to take a long rest to bring on low tide and open up the demo's final area.

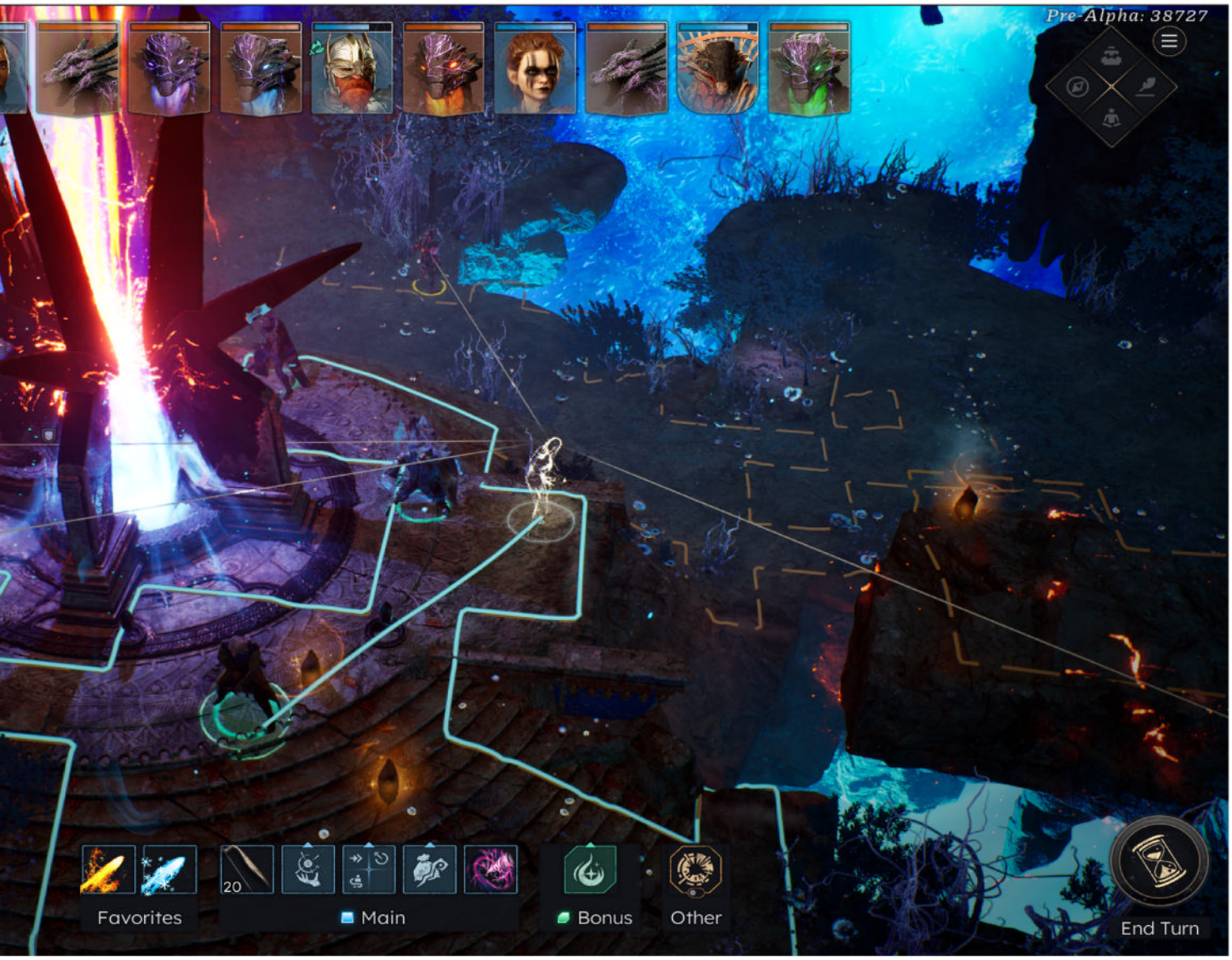
The set-piece that ensues is the highlight of my time with *Solasta 2*. While protecting the big glowy nexus, which ticks closer to exploding if I don't spend one character's action each turn calming it down, I'm attacked by waves of corrupted rock-folk and kobolds gone bad. Each turn a section of the map falls away as ground shakes and arcane lightning strikes. Fortunately the kobolds I befriended turn up halfway to help out.

Though it doesn't quite have the homebrew chaos of a fight in *Baldur's Gate III* (shove is a full action here, as per D&D's rules, rather than the generous bonus action of *BGIII*), positioning and movement matter. There's a real satisfaction to a well-placed shatter spell, or lining up a sneak attack with my rogue (though that's made harder because I can't hide once combat has started for some reason). Though the demo ends immediately after, this set piece is what sells me on *Solasta 2*. The story, setting, and characters may be perfunctory, but as long as I get a string of combats full of interesting decisions like this I'll play it anyway.

Jody Macgregor



Grid-based positioning is my happy place.



ABOVE: *Solasta*'s kobolds sound exactly like you expect.

LEFT: I pick up a lot of ingredients, but never get access to crafting.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
APRIL 17, 2025	Roger Gassmann	Senatis	paxaugusta.ch

PAX AUGUSTA

The exciting new Roman city-builder that wasn't built in a day

My father has entirely too much confidence in me. He's sending me out with a few denari in my pocket to establish a city, and expects to see me return as a successful official. It's a lot of pressure, and it's only made worse by the discovery my mother knows the local governor.

I've already proven my utter incompetence by being unable to identify a robber who attacked me on the road, potentially landing us with a court case for kidnapping after the house slaves rounded up some likely suspects for an ID parade. I've only been playing the game for five minutes, have built just two small temples on my father's orders, and now the governor wants a bribe.

Pax Augusta is a city-builder set in ancient Rome, and casts you as a fledgling civil servant burdened by high parental expectations and an apparent magnetism for the criminal and the corrupt. It aims for a degree of historical accuracy, with input from archaeologists to correct mistakes in its building models, and takes inspiration from visits to ancient sites.

The game, according to its Swiss developer Roger Gassmann, was born from memories of trips to such places, especially Augusta Raurica, a Roman archaeological site and open-air museum that's the site of the oldest known Roman colony on the Rhine. The game is set in northern Gaul and Germania, so the Swiss settlement, on a high plateau above the river, makes for a clear inspiration. "I was a very bad student," he says. "I had to learn things that didn't interest me. At some point we had Roman history. That was very boring. When we went to Augusta Raurica with the class, I saw the ruins for the first time and thought to myself, 'They made all that by hand back then.' I was immediately enthusiastic. Looking back, I noticed that I learn very well when I see things and see the connection between theory and practice."

AIMS FOR A DEGREE OF HISTORICAL ACCURACY, WITH INPUT FROM ARCHAEOLOGISTS

And so, when he noticed a gap in the market for a Roman city builder, Gassmann decided to make something by hand himself. This was not a small step for a former economics lecturer who had no game-making experience, "I had no idea how to make a game. I had no 3D skills, nor was I good at programming," he says. "I had no idea how to start and had to change the concept several times. Looking back, I wouldn't do such a big project again. I haven't had a free weekend for years, and it's been years since my last vacation. I sacrificed a lot to make my dream come true.

PLAYED IT

"*Caesar II* is my great love. But of course *SimCity 2000* and *3000*, plus *Cities Skylines*, are also favourites of mine. I actually like all city builders that have a connection to reality. I waited for years for a new Roman city builder. But unfortunately nobody developed one."

ALL ROADS

Back in the newly founded Roman town of Silva Girmetoum, houses are being built and roads constructed. The empire's famously straight thoroughfares make up the backbone of the town, and houses gain a bonus if they're constructed facing onto them. You'll need accommodation, a water supply, a marketplace for your citizens to buy food, and a graveyard to dispose of them after a happy life of economic productivity.

From here, you can produce a lumber yard to make use of the forests that surround your fledgling settlement. There's a few problems – this is a city-building game, so you need resources. And this is a Roman empire game, so one of those resources is slave labour. Could this, perhaps, be problematic? The way the slave market is

Pax Augusta

THE FORUM
The centre of Roman civic life, the Forum is the public square and courtroom, with a distinctive basilica built next to it for government functions and important meetings.

represented in the game leaves little to the imagination. You'll need to build cages, and can clearly see the captured slaves restrained by their necks, and a crowd of potential owners lining up at an auction. It's stomach-churning. "Like many ancient civilisations, slavery was a cornerstone of [Roman] society," says Gassmann. "In order to build certain buildings, you have to buy slaves from traders and keep them on hand. You can also buy your own slaves, who help you with your administrative work, and will give you a bonus. You can then release them, and you then become their patron. This gives them a salary, but also makes them more motivated to work for you. We must understand that this was a different concept of slavery than we know from colonisation. That doesn't make it any better, but it was definitely very different. A Roman city-builder without slavery would be impossible for me."

BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION

What also appears to be impossible is to build this damn town without the local governor sticking his beak in and trying to get a taste. My attempt to bribe him at the beginning of the game failed – I apparently didn't offer enough – but he looked kindly on my inexperienced ways and offered extra building materials instead. This air of benevolence ends when he sends a messenger to what's effectively a building site in the woods and solicits a little payment. Giving him nothing will make life difficult by rendering supply contracts invalid. Paying him a large purse will

THE ARENA
As seen in Gladiator and its inferior sequel, this mighty stone edifice is home to fierce battles to the death. It starts out as a much more humble building, however.
WATER SUPPLY
First dig simple wells, then construct a glorious aqueduct to bring water to your thirsty population. See the Pont du Gard in Nimes, France, for more details.

lower my reputation, and the stench of corruption will follow me. Luckily, there's a middle way, and he seems happy with a lower amount, just to allow the supplies to keep flowing. I suspect, however, that this is not the last time I'll see this messenger, and that the governor will not be so easily bought in future.

"Corruption will play a very big role in the game," says Gassmann. "The topic is very present and will cost you a lot of nerves. Especially in story mode. I want to show the player that the Romans were a superpower, but not everything was quite as great as we imagine."

This dark side of the Roman empire is a constant theme in *Pax Augusta*. The game is set after the death of Julius Caesar, a period in which the borders of the empire were expanding. It's a time that Gassmann believes resonates with strategy game players. "Imagine a superpower with a strong army in which several cultures live together peacefully, where law and order prevail and the people benefit from the government's infrastructure construction. People live together peacefully, protected from external threats by the army. What more could you want? That is a secret wish of many people. That is why Roman history is so popular," he says.

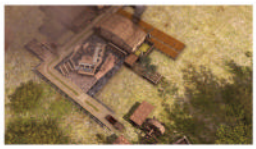
A PERIOD IN WHICH THE BORDERS OF THE EMPIRE WERE EXPANDING

Pax Augusta

RIGHT: City walls become essential for the defence of your settlement.

BELOW: PC PowerPlay! Get your PC PowerPlay! New issue out today!

Keep your population entertained, and they won't mind the taxes so much.



"The only problem is that we have a romanticised view of history. The Romans suffered many defeats, many people were poor and the infrastructure was not always made of marble. With *Pax Augusta* I want to correct the romantic image somewhat. I do not want to badmouth the Romans or rewrite history. I just want to show that not everything was made of marble."

ROMANES EUNT DOMUS

And this is what led Gassmann to lean toward accuracy in the game's buildings, though this can at times prove difficult. "I always found it annoying that the proportions weren't right when playing Roman city builders," he says. "So I spent weeks travelling around Europe in rain and snow, looking for well-known and unknown Roman buildings. What many people don't know is that we have almost no idea what the buildings actually looked like. We only have foundation walls. But how high were the buildings? What did the facade look like? Very rarely do you find a house wall that has fallen over. If no one has removed the stones, then you may know what the whole facade looked like. But we don't actually know that for many buildings."

And so the buildings we first put up in our makeshift town are wooden – the sort of thing that doesn't survive well in an archaeological context – even the theatre. Get a few quarries and iron mines going, make a small fortune from taxes, evict local tribal farmers from their land and force them to rent accommodation in your town instead, and you might be able to upgrade to stone.

According to Gassmann, there's a high level of detail in these early buildings, though you may not notice, "In the longhouses, the wooden beams do not simply stand on the ground, but rather they stand on a small stone, as was found during excavations. Of course, no one notices this, but for me it is important."

The wooden buildings are, naturally, vulnerable to fire, and you're able to build a fire tower with a crew who will douse buildings with water or demolish them if they're burning. And how do they start burning? It could be a random event, or you could use the tempting Start Fire button at the top right of the interface. This lets you pop down a conflagration anywhere you choose, and the air fills with smoke and screams as it takes hold.

YOU COULD USE THE TEMPTING START FIRE BUTTON AT THE TOP RIGHT OF THE INTERFACE

VOX POPULI

Along with the city-building sandbox, there's a story mode in the game that's inspired by the historical writings of Tacitus and can see your character amass a fortune, buy their way into the Roman senate, and perhaps become emperor. Along with all the bribery, the moods of those above you in the social strata will have an effect on how you progress, and likewise the common people of your towns need to be kept satisfied or they'll wander off in search of a leader who better understands their needs.

The population is once again made with history firmly in mind, "A German archaeologist designed the people in the game so that their hairstyles and clothes are accurate," says Gassmann. Part of the joy of any good city-builder is observing the residents from your bird's eye view as they follow their routines, though Gassmann admits this was a learning experience for him. "The NPCs visit friends or go to the theatre, but that's about all that happens. You have to remember that I do all this alone and without any prior knowledge. I can't program real life simulations, I don't have the skills for that. That's a shame, but I only do it as a hobby.

"My greatest wish would have been to have a road system like *Cities Skylines*. But I couldn't do that without any programming experience. I cried tears of joy when I was able to program a road system with straight roads. These are compromises that I had to make because I had no programming experience. I understand anyone who doesn't like that. But I've reached the limits of my abilities and can't do any better."

Anyone playing the demo version of the game that's available on Steam will be impressed by one man's ability to code a complete city-builder in his spare time. "The biggest goal is to make people happy," Gassmann says. "If you play the game and have a good time, then I have achieved my goal. It doesn't matter if someone has ten or a hundred hours of fun with it. The main thing is that they have a good time."

Ian Evenden

By Ian Evenden

The chapter in the demo is set in the past, but more up-to-date time periods are promised.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Wadjet Eye Games	Wadjet Eye Games	s.team/a/1346360

OLD SKIES

A time-travel adventure spanning 200 years

This point-and-click time-travel adventure from the studio behind *The Excavation of Hob's Barrow* has been sitting on Steam waiting for a release date since 2022. It still doesn't have that release date, though the 'coming soon' banner gives some hope. It does, however, have a new demo.

PLAYED IT

And that demo begins with some dialogue that's sure to be foreshadowing in some way – two time travellers talking about someone getting 'paradoxed out of existence'. The player character is Fia Quinn, who works for the ChronoZen agency and carries a currency unit that can print out money from any era. She has a multitool and a weapon too, in an inventory that descends from the top of the screen in classic point and click fashion, and can change her clothes at will to blend in. She's soon sent to 1871 in search of a boxer, with a client in tow who's probably not telling the whole truth about why she wants to go back in time. The game is fully voiced, and early encounters are nicely written – particularly the older lady enjoying her view of a training boxer's backside. Sweeping the mouse pointer around the screen reveals points of interest, with useful descriptions popping up so you don't have to wander around the screen just to look at things.

TIMEY-WIMEY

There's also a bit of reading to do, with a ChronoZen field manual explaining the history of time travel (discovered in 2041 apparently, so not that long to go) and a database with entries on clients and the historical figures you meet. We know the boxer we're seeking had a sickly childhood and dies of cholera 20 years after his big win in the ring, for example, but no one seems to know where he is in the period we've travelled back to.

THE GAME IS FULLY VOICED, AND EARLY ENCOUNTERS ARE NICELY WRITTEN

You can also call up Nozzo, who fills the role AI did in Quantum Leap, providing information from the future, anecdotes about his time-travel exploits and the occasional hint. From the boxing gym we move on to an oyster stand frequented by the fighter we're seeking. The city backgrounds have a lovely hand-painted watercolour quality about them, the characters' faces are expressive, and the look of the game is reminiscent of *The Last Express* – though it's considerably smoother in motion – or *Broken Sword*.

Eventually Fia and her client find their way to a bar, where they are shot and killed. The devs warn that you can die in the game, but haven't mentioned the emergency rewind protocol that rewinds time and lets you have another go. This time, Fia goes into the bar forewarned, and things play out very differently. Wadjet has an eye for a good adventure, and this could be the best yet.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Silent Games	Secret Mode	s.team/a/1377700

CAPTAIN BLOOD

Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of ten-year-old rum

Somewhere in the Caribbean, there's been a kidnapping. A lustful pirate has rammed a ship and made off with what he describes as a 'wench' in a fashionably low-cut dress. Only by hacking and slashing your way through hundreds of filthy buccaneers will you be able to get her back.

It's an old-fashioned premise for what feels like an old-fashioned game, and this might have something to do with it being in development for ten years before being abandoned, then revived last year for a release in the spring.

Rather than a revamp of the 1988 *Captain Blood*, which was a game about aliens and space travel, this puts you firmly in the boots of a pirate captain, swordfighting his way to victory after having his dinner interrupted. There's a bit of a combat system on show in the demo, which may become deeper as the game goes on – attacks come quickly with your main weapon, which can be swapped for those dropped by enemies. There's also a gun, which you have to be pointing in the right direction to get a hit with, and execution moves to end a fight quickly – often before it's even begun. You can also dive to dodge under an enemy attack.

FIRST LOOK

THICKER THAN WATER

As a 3D game, albeit one that likes to slide into a left-to-right sidescrolling form when it can, the controls aren't ideal for mouse and keyboard, so good controller support will be crucial for making a success of it.

As it stands, the game has the feeling of Japanese beat 'em ups of the early 2000s about it, the sort of thing where you are attacked by enemies from all sides and crowd control is just as important as one-on-one brawls, and with similarly low-poly character design but a smoothness the PS2 could never manage. With tight controls and a thrilling combo system, however, there's no reason *Captain Blood* couldn't turn out to be buried treasure after all these years.

By Ian Evenden

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Nullpointer Games	Nullpointer Games, Outersloth	s.team/a/2836860

THE HORROR AT HIGHROOK

That is not dead which can eternal draw new cards

This deckbuilding narrative RPG is set in a haunted house and has serious gothic novel vibes. There's also a big hit of Cluedo in there too, as your characters move around the building, each with a task to perform, discovering secret tunnels and other mysterious things as they do.

PLAYED IT

The deckbuilding comes from the way your team investigates the house. The Ackeron family has fallen into disrepute among rumours of dark pacts and shadowy rituals, and has disappeared. The mayor of the local town has sent a group in to investigate. There's a secret organisation of mystics known as the 'Seekers Communion' at work, pointing to exactly the sort of cosmic horror you might expect from a game with this much Lovecraft about it.

It's played on a board that looks a lot like a popular murder-solving game, though it's probably less likely that you'll run into Colonel Mustard than Yog-Sothoth. To begin with, there are three investigators on the board. There's Mecanist Astor, who's got a whole steampunk thing going on with brass goggles and a leather jacket. Scholar Vitali wears glasses and looks like someone fond of forbidden knowledge. While Atticus Hawk can barely keep his buttons fastened over his bulging muscles, and wants to get things over with quickly. Good luck to him.

CALL OF THE CARDS

Characters and objects are represented by cards. Place a locked chest next to someone with a key, or some other way of unlocking it, and you'll be able to open it up, with support cards making this easier. Rather than being strictly turn-based, different characters can interact with different objects in different rooms at the same time. And bang on cue, here's the fourth member of our party, Doctor Caligar, who seems to have come straight from the Venice carnival and brings a code with him we can use to access a laboratory.

IT'S LESS LIKELY THAT YOU'LL RUN INTO COLONEL MUSTARD THAN YOG-SOTHOTH

From there, you're free to explore the mansion, coming across new cards and working out where to make use of them (they helpfully tell you which room they can be used in, but not by whom). The doctor needs to drink alcohol or will lose health, so setting him up in the dining room with some moonshine seems like a good idea, while the scholar spends his time pulling secrets out of a codex in the archives, producing new cards for the others to use. In the kitchen, you can combine ingredients to produce meals, and heal your party.

Rather than pitting you against enemies à la *Slay the Spire*, *Highrook* instead asks you to complete a constantly shifting puzzle, for an interesting new spin on the deckbuilder.

EMPYREAL

Beware of sci-fi monoliths bearing gifts

An expedition to a distant planet uncovers a mysterious monolith in this action-RPG from an indie studio based in Newcastle Upon Tyne. But unlike in that hub of UK game development, the civilisation in *Empyreal* is a lost one, the planet unexplored but teeming with dangerous automata.

The trailers and screens released so far show a game in which weapons can be absolutely massive, with huge glowing blades and enormous guns brought to bear on robotic opponents who tower over the player character while the ruins of an ancient civilisation collapse around them. Combat looks to be acrobatic, with plenty of flips and rolls to get you out of enemy clutches, with shield blocks and ranged attacks used to keep them at bay.

Luckily, you're an elite mercenary. And while the game may sound like a Soulslike when you put it like that, there seems to be some *Mass Effect* in the mix too, with custom characters, armour bonuses and upgradable equipment, a supporting cast with personal questlines and multiple endings. One to watch.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	Silent Games	Secret Mode	s.team/a/1377700

It's a singleplayer game, but one that's crying out for co-op.

FIRST LOOK

WHEEL WORLD

Life on the open road

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2025	Messhof	Annapurna Interactive	s.team/a/1497460

Saving the world from collapse by riding your bicycle really fast is a bold proposition even for a videogame. As a cyclist in an open world filled with races and other two-wheeled things to do, your main task is to collect legendary bike parts that have been stolen, and use them to perform some sort of destiny-fulfilling ritual, which sounds just vague enough that it might just work out in the end.

POSIT

MEDI

DOOM: THE DARK AGES
is going back in time

By Ted Litchfield

LVELY
E NAL

It's easy to take the revival of fast-moving, exploration-heavy 'boomer shooters' for granted in 2025, but nine years ago, *Doom 2016* hit the industry like a bolt from the blue, with nary an iron sight or cover system to speak of. The entire genre leapt to crib off id's notes.

These days, id Software is far from the old man on the ropes trying to prove there's an audience for this sort of game that it was in the early 2010s. A 2020 sequel, *Doom Eternal*, showed that id's second wind wasn't some fleeting thing, that the long John-less (that is, Romero and Carmack) FPS trailblazer has what it takes to go the distance.

Alongside neo-*Doom*, there's been an explosion of indie 'boomer shooters' imitating '90s sensibilities and aesthetics, and with the notable exceptions of *Call of Duty* and *Escape from Tarkov*, movement and bombast have replaced gritty realism as the go-to style even in big budget shooters. *Doom* is once again the king everyone else is coming after, and we've wondered where id would take things next.

MEDIEVAL-THEMED

Rather than trying to continue the story of *Eternal*'s *Ancient Gods* DLC, the studio decided to go back in time for its next entry. *Doom: The Dark Ages* is a medieval-themed prequel that draws on the mythology of angels, demons, and heroic champions that id developed in its reboot series. *Doom 2016* begins with the Slayer locked in an ancient sarcophagus, waiting to be reawoken to fight the forces of hell, and the series has alluded to his allegiance to an ancient band of legendary warriors brought low with his imprisonment.

In an interview with *Doom: The Dark Ages* game director Hugo Martin and producer Marty Stratton, the two pulled back more of the curtain on the project ahead of its May 15 release, particularly how it would differentiate itself from *Doom 2016* and *Doom Eternal*, as well as how they view it as even more of a return to the feel of classic *Doom* than those games.

DOOM CLONE

In prior showcases, Martin and Stratton have highlighted *The Dark Ages*' boots-on-the-ground focus, saying that the Slayer feels more like an "iron tank" in the new game, rather than the "fighter jet" of *Doom Eternal*. That focus came out of revisiting id's 1993 and '94 original games, something Martin and Stratton say the team does before each project, always managing to find something new. "[Students] study Norman Rockwell, the Mona Lisa," Martin says of *Doom*'s richness as a source of inspiration. "This is very much our piece of classical art that was made by the founders of the company."

The takeaway for Martin this time around was "how slow the projectiles moved, that it was really a three-dimensional shmup" referring to shoot-'em-up or bullet hell games like *Galaxian* or *Ikaruga* where the focus is more on avoiding enemy projectiles as you keep firing in their direction, rather than precision aiming.

"They call it a 'movement shooter', but it's completely grounded, and the movement is all about the maze that's created by the slow-moving projectiles that collect in the space, and you weave between them as you go to deliver damage to the enemy." Not wanting to make '*Doom 2016 2.0*' or '*Doom Eternal 2.0*', the team at id found this to be a strong basis for a game without *Eternal*'s acrobatics, but that still centred on skilful movement – after all, the original *Doom*s didn't even have a jump button.

"Every time we play, we learn something," says Martin. "And that was the big lesson, how slow the projectiles moved, and how that played off the speed of the player, the movement speed of the player, and how you could use that as a foundation for this game, especially a game that was aiming to make a heavier, more powerful Slayer. We still haven't gotten this right yet. There's more juice to squeeze." Catching himself, Martin clarifies: "I wouldn't say, 'Got it right.' It's just that the source material still has something to teach us."

DOOM IS ONCE AGAIN THE KING EVERYONE ELSE IS COMING AFTER

Gameplay xxxxx

FAR LEFT: These guys were hard enough without armour.

ABOVE: Super shotgun, meet demonic beast.

LEFT: This is where the good guys live.

SHIELD WALL

A less elegant weapon of an uncivilised age

PARRY
Time your block to weaken an enemy.

BLOCK
Miss the parry? You'll still protect yourself.

CHARGE
A replacement for *Eternal*'s "meat hook" grapple hook.

THROW
A contextual Captain America toss – lodge it in one guy or let it bounce around.

RUNES
Slot in special upgrades like an auto turret or earthquake attack.

THE NEW PARRY SYSTEM WITH THE SHIELD WOULD BE CENTRAL TO SKILFUL PLAY

ABOVE: How does he pee straight?

EN GARDE

Alongside this bullet hell ethos, there's one other fundamental shift that differentiates *The Dark Ages* from its immediate predecessors: an extensive parry and melee weapons system centred on a chainsaw shield you can also throw Captain America-style, as well as your choice of a heavy mace, electrified gauntlet, or spiked flail.

Martin characterises this new system of "shield-melee-guns" as a direct response to player complaints about *Doom Eternal*, where you had to constantly juggle your arsenal to target weaknesses, particularly at higher difficulties. "The quick switching emerged into combos, and you're switching between weapons to combine attacks to exploit weaknesses," said Martin. "That's now all been streamlined into your base kit of shield, melee, guns, so you will still be using combinations to take out enemy weaknesses and falter them and deliver damage, but you're going to be doing that with your base kit of shield, melee, guns, so you won't need to quick switch between your weapons in order to maximise your DPS. You could just do it with the kit that you have."

Martin says that the new parry system with the shield would be central to skilful play, with the assessment that, "You probably could get by most of it without parrying too much. But I don't think you're going to beat the game without parrying." Thankfully, id studied the best when devising its system. Martin shouted out *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* as one of his favourite games, and *The Dark Ages*' parry system sure sounds like *Sekiro*'s perfect blocks. Raise your shield to block and, if you time it well, you'll parry the enemy. Mistime it, and you'll still block the attack without a counter effect to the enemy – you won't be left in the lurch like *Elden Ring*'s all-or-nothing parries.

"A lot of the progression in the guns plays off of the idea that I'll be parrying projectiles," Martin said. "Every time I parry a projectile, I charge up my melee. Because melee has to charge kind of like Blood Punch in *Eternal*. It's all about synergy and flow with a very streamlined control scheme this time. You should be fighting the enemies, not the controls."

MR MARAUDER

On the subject of making *Doom Eternal*'s ideas more approachable in *The Dark Ages*, keeping the skill

THE DRAGON
There will be multiple mech and dragon levels. Martin compares the Dragon missions to *Halo*, with you hopping on and off for on-foot sections. The Atlan levels are all-Atlan, though.

ceiling where it is while lowering the floor, I had to ask about the Marauder. This divisive, frequent miniboss split *Doom Eternal*'s players, with some true sickos lauding the mastery of *Eternal*'s arsenal it demanded, while others found it to be an aggravating difficulty spike. According to Martin, we've already seen *The Dark Ages*' Marauder.

"The big guy in the trailer," Martin confirmed. "The Agaddon Hunter is the new Marauder." In *The Dark Ages*' developer direct showcase, the Agaddon Hunter is the big old wolf lad with the fur cape and double-bladed sword. He looks like one of those *Dark Souls* bosses who's not a climax fight with a cutscene, but still winds up being way more memorable as a punishing fight.

"He's not based on the Marauder. He's not like 'Big Marauder' it's *Dark Ages*, so it's very different," Martin clarifies. "But he's similar in that a lot of the bosses they'll challenge you in different ways. It's all about pushing: parry, dodging and weaving between projectiles. We take everything that you've been doing in the game up to that point. It's like it's exam time, everything else is a quiz. When you get to the boss, it's the final exam."

Martin hopes that the Agaddon and other bosses in *The Dark Ages* will challenge players, but not necessarily frustrate many of them in the same way the Marauder managed. Part of that comes from streamlining weapon-switch combos into *The Dark Ages*' shield-melee-guns triangle, but Martin also acknowledged that *Eternal* might not have properly trained players to know what to do with the Marauder when they first encountered it.

"When I think about the Marauder, much of what he was asking you to do, the core of what he was asking you to do, in terms of shooting him and faltering him during those windows, you hadn't really done much of that in the game up to that point," Martin explains. "So when the Agaddon Hunter shows up, or many bosses, everything he asks you to do you've been doing the whole game."

In the Agaddon Hunter's case, it sounds like what we'll be doing is a lot of parrying. "[Most enemies] do single attacks. But our minibosses, of which we have many, they'll do combo attacks," Martin says. "So you'll have to parry multiple attacks

THE GUYS OF DOOM

A lineage of beast-slaying beefcakes

DOOMGUY
The original, accept no substitutes. May actually be the same guy as the Doom Slayer.

DOOM SLAYER
A primeval force of wrath and destruction. Loves collecting Funko Pops of himself.

DOOM MARINE
Just some guy? Unable to master the "flashlight in one hand, gun in the other" martial art.

BOOMER SHOOTER
Martin hates the word 'maze', but says these are the most retro levels id has done in some time. Stratton says secrets will be more consistently, materially rewarding.

IT SOUNDS LIKE FIGHTING LATER SEKIRO BOSSES SUCH AS THE LONE SHADOWS

in succession in order to falter them." It almost sounds like fighting later *Sekiro* bosses such as the Lone Shadows or Long Arm Centipedes, and I'm curious how these parry-demanding onslaughts will translate in *The Dark Ages*' pace of play. In general, Martin describes the parry windows of *The Dark Ages* as being a bit more generous than something like *Sekiro*, to account for a lower frequency but higher impact of pulling one off.

BUILD ME UP

With weapon quick switching off the menu, Martin and Stratton said that *The Dark Ages* will have more of a player preference focus when it comes to the arsenal. You'll always have access to the full selection wheel (or number row) of guns you've accrued – we're not talking some kind of *Call of Duty* loadout heresy here – but Martin indicated that the synergies between different equippable guns, upgrades and melee weapons will lend themselves to what are effectively character builds, even if id Software isn't actually calling them that.

"You know which enemies you are going up against in the level you're in," Martin says. "That might be your kit that you use for 20-30 minutes of game play. You could roll with the same gun, by design, this time throughout the entire level." You'll also be able to hone your character with runes you slot into your

GLORY KILLS
Full-on Glory Kills have been reduced in frequency, with more unsynced contextual takedowns that don't lock you down for as long, all in service of a better flow to the game.
DIFFICULTY SLIDERS
You can make granular adjustments to game speed, parry timing, and other variables alongside overall difficulty. If you want that Ultra Nightmare 'cheevo, though, you'll have to keep it stock.

chainsaw shield. Martin highlights examples such as an area of effect lightning power, shoulder-mounted machine gun turret, hellish fissure earthquake attack and the ability to fire off ethereal daggers.

"I might pick the machine gun turret, shield rune, the super shotgun and the mace," Martin offers as an example build. "Well I'm rolling pretty heavy at that point, a little bit slower rate of fire, but a bigger punch, and it's really fun. You could roll like that for a very long time, then the core loop is always shield, guns, and melee, and each of the systems feed off each other."

PEAK GORE

We'd talked a lot about melee weapons and parrying at this point, but the heart and soul of *Doom* is big, chunky, destructive guns. Martin and Stratton have some very exciting news on that front: most of the gun list will be made up of new weapons, with this arsenal sounding like an even bigger break than the one between *Doom 2016* and *Eternal*.

"I think only the shotguns are the same," Martin said. "The plasma is so different, so the rest are brand-new. That was by design, really making sure that we were giving you new tools to master." He brought up *Eternal*'s Heavy Cannon, a scoped assault rifle, as an example of the sort of thing the team decided it was best to leave behind. "To put that back in

players' hands at the start of *Dark Ages*, I mean, it's going to start feeling like a DLC, because they've already mastered that tool. You got to have your classics. It's a *Doom* game. You got to have a plasma rifle. You got to have the shotguns. But then what else can we make? So we started every gun from scratch."

"It's *Doom*, and our team spends so much time with every little detail in the guns," says Stratton. "So the feedback is awesome. It just depends on the moment. There's times you whip out the rocket launcher to take out a tank or a larger group of enemies, and it's just so explosive and fun. It's always hard to pick a favourite."

Among the new guys, Martin says he is quite partial to The Accelerator, *The Dark Ages*' take on a plasma gun, which he characterises as "basically an SMG plasma rifle. So it's short range, high rate of fire, and it's very fun". Stratton, meanwhile, is a fan of the Railspike, which from the trailers looks to fit in the grand tradition of *Painkiller*'s Stake Gun, *Half-Life*'s crossbow, or *Fallout*'s Railway Rifle.

I have one gun on my mind though: I want to hear everything they can tell me about that gun from the trailer that is constantly stuffing skulls into a wood chipper and blasting the shards at enemies, which is apparently (and fittingly) called the Skullcrusher.

"When you think about, in previous *Doom* arsenals, what you could compare it to, it's a minigun," says Martin. "As you kill demons. It powers up the skull, because the skull is demonic. And then if you've killed enough demons, you get a power boost." As you fire on enemies, the Skullcrusher's rate of fire increases while it also boosts your movement speed, but unless you upgrade it with a range and accuracy-improving choke, you have to get in super close for it to be effective.

"The base one that you've seen in the trailers. I kind of describe that as a weed whacker," Martin says. "That's what it feels like when I'm running around with it. And you've got to get close, but when you get close to guys, we've done a lot of custom tuning to the gore and the falters."

The violent effect from the Skullcrusher gets Martin onto the subject of *Doom*'s simulation of gore and gibs, something he is clearly very proud of, describing id Software as having "the best gore in the industry," which prompts Stratton to quip that they've found something to go on their business cards.

"A big point of reference for us was in Robocop when the executive gets shot by ED-209, and these pieces of footage become like the North Star for us," Martin explains. "The way that guy in that scene in particular gets held in place, we all remember it, ED-209 shoots him for what feels like three minutes, and he doesn't fall down, he just stays up, and then when he's done, he finally falls. With our destructible demons – which are back and better than ever – it looks amazing."

Martin calls this "destructable demons version three" after the iterations in 2016 and *Eternal*, and he paints a vivid picture of how you can recreate that 'Robocop moment' with the Skullcrusher in *The Dark Ages*: "It feels so good with the Skullcrusher, because you'll run up to a bunch of fodder, and you're just holding them in place as their limbs come off and their bodies shake and they don't drop until you let go of the trigger. And it's funny how long you'll hold on to the trigger, because you like to watch them sit there and shake."

COFFIN BLUES

I'd wondered how *The Dark Ages* could avoid having an overly maudlin tone, what with the great curse of all prequels: you know how it ends. No matter how the story in *The Dark Ages* transpires, the Slayer winds up in that coffin eventually, and things get pretty bleak for his warrior buddies, the Night Sentinels. Martin has a surprising response when I ask about this, though: *The Dark Ages* itself doesn't end with the Slayer locked inside that coffin. What's more, this probably isn't the last story id will tell during this part of the *Doom* timeline.

"Not yet. I mean, that would end the medieval chapter of the *Doom* saga," Martin says of stuffing the Slayer inside that coffin come May. "This is kind of like the Chronicles of the Slayer. So if we took it all the way to that point, then that would mean that we couldn't tell any more medieval stories. And I'm not announcing projects or anything other than to just say it's better to leave it open."

ARSENAL GEAR

What is Doom without guns?

THE SKULLCRUSHER
A chaingun by any other name, but with a hilarious visual schtick.

ATLAN CHAINGUN
A chaingun by its normal name, used by a 30-storey mech.

THE ACCELERATOR
A plasma SMG rather than a rifle. Spits out those little blue balls.

ROCKER LAUNCHER
Classic for a reason, truly one of the most satisfying FPS staples.

RAILSPIKE
The trailer shows this weapon pinning imps to walls.

SUPER SHOTGUN
My oldest, dearest friend. It's not an ultra shotgun unfortunately.

STUFFING SKULLS INTO A WOOD CHIPPER AND BLASTING THE SHARDS AT ENEMIES

ABOVE: The Skull Crusher is one of *Doom: The Dark Ages*' most visually striking new weapons.

LEFT: Meet your new Marauder.

Though he asserts that this isn't "*Doom: The Darker Ages* confirmed" Martin does state pretty certainly that there would be story DLC akin to *Eternal*'s *The Ancient Gods*. So while things go south for *Doom* Slayer and friends eventually, it sounds like *The Dark Ages* won't be a complete bummer-fest along the lines of *Halo Reach*. "The story is that they collapsed a building on top of him and then put him inside of that sarcophagus that we find him in at the beginning of 2016," says Martin. "And this game doesn't end that way."

However *Doom: The Dark Ages* ends, I'm along for the ride. The combo of classic FPS projectile dodging with *Sekiro*-style parries sounds like action game bliss, and much as I love the boundless creativity of the indie shooter scene, they categorically cannot touch the sheer spectacle that id Software is capable of. There's just one problem as far as I'm concerned: what happened to the Slayer's shield before *Doom 2016*? Did he leave it behind the sofa? Does he miss it? ■

REBEL REBEL

ATOMFALL is a British STALKER that only Rebellion could make

By Joshua Wolens

For over a decade, *Atomfall* has been Rebellion CEO Jason Kingsley's "dream game", one he was dropping coy, detail-free allusions to in chats with PCPP all the way back in 2018. Set in the heart of most barbaric Cumbria in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, it feels like someone armed a Hovis advert, and it's part of a proud lineage of pain-in-the-ass games that includes beloved classics like *STALKER* and *Morrowind*. No quest markers here, sir. You'll find your own way or die in the attempt. Perhaps both.

But *Atomfall* also feels like a statement about Rebellion itself: the position it's obtained and the opportunities it's opened up for itself after years and years of quietly putting out *Sniper Elites*, *Zombie Armies* and the odd *Evil Genius*.

It's a studio that's mostly avoided the dramatic, precipitous upswings and downfalls that have defined the game industry for the last, well, forever, but which has been especially acute over the last few years of swingeing layoffs and spectacular crashes.

Through it all, Rebellion has quietly churned along in the background, gradually building its capacities and fiercely valuing its own independence.

So, playing *Atomfall*, I can't help but feel like it's arrived on the crest of two waves at once. On the one hand, it's part of a broader return of games born of that old-school, no-hand-holding mentality that's also manifested in things like *KCDII* and *STALKER 2*. On the other, it feels like another point on the board for those rare studios that don't answer to the whims and dictates of shareholders.

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH

Atomfall is a throwback in more ways than one. In the grand tradition of 2005's finest videogames, you're an amnesiac, waking up in a walled-off section of the UK's Lake District in the aftermath of the 1957 Windscale fire, the worst nuclear accident in the country's history.

The fallout's sent Cumbria a bit weird, filled with ooky-spooky monsters, roving bandits, and a population that's responded to the crisis by embracing its inner Wicker Man. In response, Her Majesty's Government has sent in the army – a crack force of pip-pip-tally-ho officers and calloused Tommies – to keep order.

My demo dropped me at the edge of all this and pointed me, well, nowhere. Like I said, *Atomfall* has no quest markers, but 'leads', collections of evidence under different quest headings that you, the player, have to use your noggin to parse and figure out. I started with just one – that somewhere around here was a medicine woman named Mother Jago – and immediately got distracted from it.

Atomfall's Cumbria is not one open world, but a collection of open-but-smallish maps, and each of them is pockmarked by caves, druid camps, and eerie landmarks glimpsed in the distance. Playing is a constant process of seeing a thing, wondering what it is, and getting completely diverted from whatever you were doing before.

In my case, those distractions meant getting embroiled in a lot of brawls with local miscreants: outlaws and druids, mostly. When our own Phil Savage tried the game half a year ago at Gamescom, he had qualms about its combat, but I get the impression that Rebellion's spent the intervening time working on it almost exclusively. It feels good: cracking someone round the head with a cricket bat feels crunchy and impactful, while drawing a gun feels almost like cheating. This is the UK, almost no one has firearms, and bullets put enemies down so fast that even drawing a rusty old revolver feels like an instant argument-ender, a bonafide nuclear option. No wonder I got so distracted picking fights with pagans.

BELOW: The military is everywhere; folks aren't thrilled.

WANDERING MIND

Those distractions are entirely the point. A key goal for the game's devs was "to give you a sense of proper freedom" says Kingsley. That means you can, if you're so inclined "go around as a mass murderer and shoot everybody" and the game will attempt to contort itself around your choices, *New Vegas*-style. "From a pure games design perspective, it's really nice to lean into what computers can do well, which is react to you and give you a different experience." I was eager to test this, so immediately upon finding Mother Jago (after getting distracted by a cave filled with druids, a conspiracy in the local

CRACKING SOMEONE ROUND THE HEAD WITH A CRICKET BAT FEELS CRUNCHY AND IMPACTFUL

village, several threatening phone calls from an anonymous Welshman, and attempting a one-man assault on a local military outpost) I loosed an arrow into her head, expecting it not to work.

It worked, and Mother Jago – who I'd assumed was some kind of plot-critical NPC – crumpled into her flower bed before I'd given her so much as how'd-you-do, no game over screen, not even a *Morrowind*-style 'you've really hosed this one, chief' pop-up. It might even have been a good idea: I found a letter on her body that suggested nefarious dealings with local druids. My attempt to dam up this part of the game's plot had only succeeded in diverting it along a new course, generating new leads, though I could have reloaded if I'd had regrets. Kingsley says it's not just possible to make a decision you regret and reload a save, it's pretty much assumed you will. The game's narrative variables are there for you to jam a spanner into, reload, then jam it in again somewhere else.

ABOVE: Wyndham village and its surroundings are full of collectibles.

My hour-and-a-half with the game didn't quite give me the time necessary to really see how far these systems bend, but the idea is exactly the kind of thing that gets me very excited. Still, I'll reserve judgment until I have the full game in my hands; Kingsley cops to the fact that it's all quite new for Rebellion as a whole. "Making a sniping game, we kind of know what works... we sort of were experts in that. In this area, whilst I play games like this a lot myself, the difference between playing a game and making a game is quite stark, actually, and so there's a little bit more nervousness, but also excitement."

TOP GEAR

Surviving Britain means weapons. In the game, too

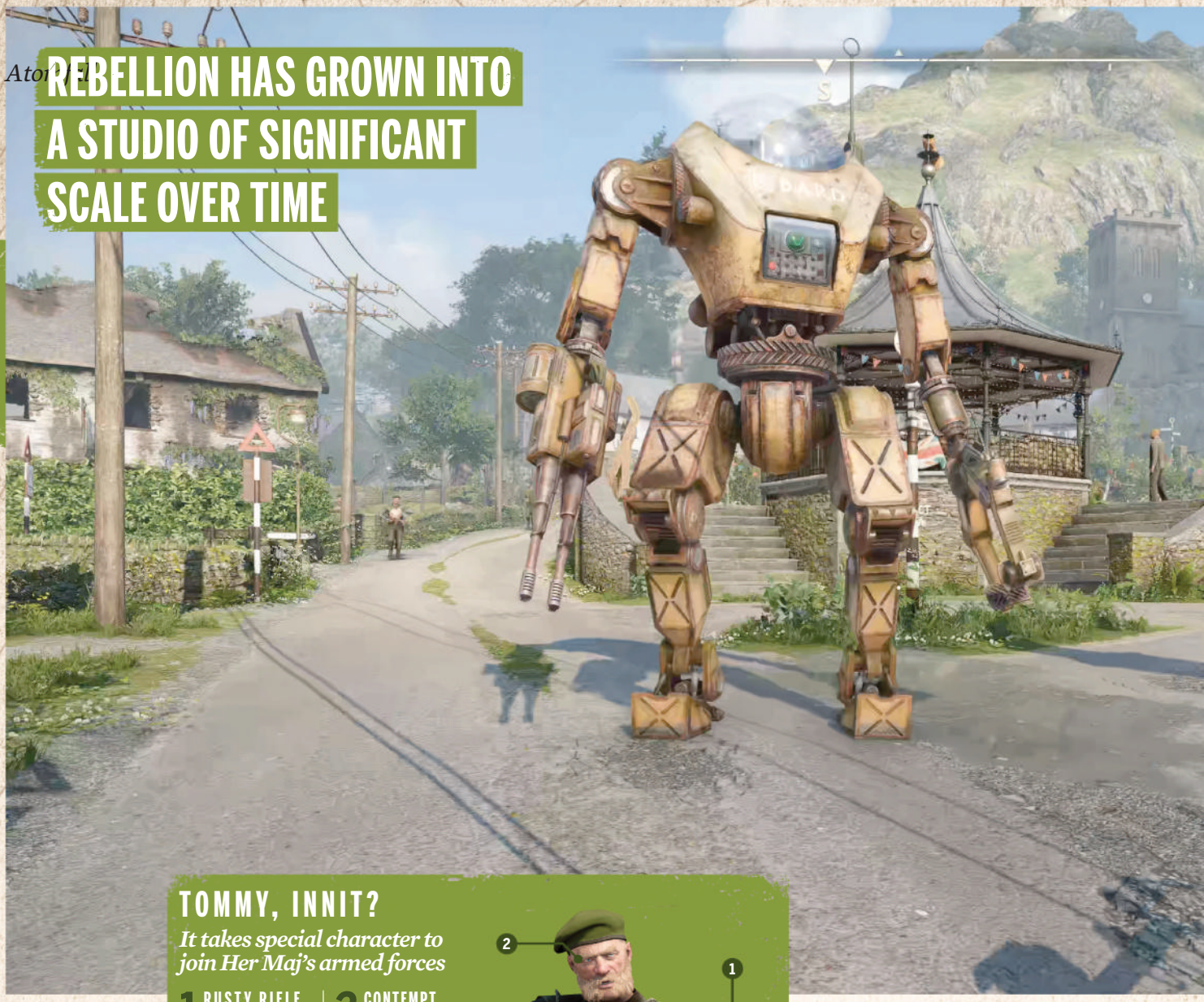
THE 'UMBLE BAT
Nobody actually knows the rules of cricket. That's fine, because the rules of bludgeoning druids to death with its main implement are more than clear enough.

KNIVES OUT
Sam Colt might have made Americans equal, but Brits have been killing one another with swords, halberds, and other blades for literally centuries.

AXE 'EM A QUESTION
At range without a gun or bow? Try hoofing an axe at them. Hey, it might work, and you'll feel cool as hell if you pull it off.

LITERALLY JUST A GUN
A rarity in Britain, where they're not something you can pick up with the weekly shop. For when an encounter has to end right now.

REBELLION HAS GROWN INTO A STUDIO OF SIGNIFICANT SCALE OVER TIME



ABOVE: The army has some real wild toys.

TOMMY, INNIT?

It takes special character to join Her Maj's armed forces

1 RUSTY RIFLE
We still haven't quite recovered from that business in Europe, so a lot of the soldiers are toting old, rusted guns as they bring order to Cumbria.

2 CONTEMPT FOR PAGANISM
Brits hold their faith dearly. Whatever it is. We haven't figured out what it's meant to be after Henry VIII, but the important thing is: none of that heathen nonsense.

3 AIR OF AUTHORITY
You're not gonna bring order to the darkest heart of the Lake District if you don't have the air born of generations of aristocratic inbreeding.

4 IMPROVISED ARMOUR
Due to budget cuts, soldiers must now assemble their own life-saving protection from tree bark and bits of scrap metal. Blame the Beeching Axe.

It's the kind of experimental left-turn that a studio might find hard to pull off under the watchful, profit-hungry eyes of a board of shareholders, and multiple times in my playthrough – my quest marker-less, Emmerdale-flavoured playthough – I thought that this was the kind of thing that would get smoothed down and generalised into something far less strange and ambitious at a publicly owned studio.

GREEN SHOOTS

Rebellion has grown into a studio of significant scale over time. Kingsley says he has about 500 devs working under him now, and while the company doesn't have "the massive budgets of some of the huge companies out there" its *Sniper Elite* empire means it's still got "substantial amounts of money" to spend on pretty much whatever it likes, even FPS-RPGs set in the Lake District.

"We're more than happy to make sequels and expand that and do spin-offs, like the recent *Sniper Elite: Resistance*," says Kingsley. "But we're also aware that Chris [Kingsley, CTO] and I set Rebellion up to do fun things... so we really want to have roughly two-thirds sequels and brands, and roughly one-third slightly more experimental, try things out [with] maybe a controlled budget, see what the audience thinks, you know, build it up. We have no bankers, we have no venture capitalists, we have no external shareholders. We can play around with these ideas and kick them off, even if, theoretically, it wouldn't necessarily maximise profitability... and I appreciate that freedom every day I go to work."

That freedom has more than creative consequences – Rebellion has so far escaped the swathes of layoffs that have cut the games industry to the bone over the last few years, and it's hard not to see that as at least partially a result of not having external shareholders demanding constant returns on its investments.

"We've got a responsibility to team members and staff," says Kingsley. "We don't want to hire and fire people all the time." It also seems likely, at least to me, that the company wants to avoid a repeat of the messy layoffs it went through in 2010, when former staff at its shuttered Derby studio accused it of dodging layoff pay.

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION

For his part, Kingsley reckons Rebellion's positive performance in an era defined by layoffs is down to two things: a tight grip on project scope and the fact that both he and co-founder Chris are "games makers" themselves, much as he'd like to say it's, "Entirely due to our incredible skill at running a company. There are horror stories of people having external producers saying, 'Look, you just need to make fewer bugs,' people missing the point that games-making is creative as well as technical." Kingsley reckons his own experience lets Rebellion avoid that kind of thing. "All creative industries – films, television – are, to a certain extent, impacted negatively by people that want quick results."

But mostly Kingsley attributes Rebellion's success to its understanding of scope. "We're just very professional with controlling scope and costs," says the CEO, and ruthless about pruning parts of a game that threaten to become unwieldy. "I don't know any game designer that's ever made a game that's too small," says Kingsley. "I prefer a small, really good game than a really big kind of game that isn't focused down on what's important for the player." And so: *Atomfall*, with its limitations baked right into it from the start with the huge concrete wall that keeps the Cumbrian exclusion zone separate from the rest of Britain.

That suspicion of size-for-size's-sake extends to the company, too. I get the impression that Kingsley is wary of sudden success stories. "For example, Embracer," he says. "You can only keep that sort of massive trajectory for a certain period of time until people go, 'Hang on, whoa whoa whoa, stop. This is looking mad...' and then suddenly it all collapses."

So it sounds unlikely that Rebellion will suddenly hit the headlines with a splashy IPO in the near future. "I always keep my options open," says Kingsley, "but at the same time, I quite like being very independent." It's Rebellion's relatively small size and freedom from the whims of external influence that lets Kinglsey still take two meetings a week with dev teams, to have a hand in every project, and to make games like *Atomfall*.

AND CARRY ON

Kingsley talks about *Atomfall* like it's a game only Rebellion could have made. He might be right. Or at least a company in Rebellion's position – independent, not motivated by shareholder returns, open to ideas that aren't just aping whatever hot new thing is making oodles of cash.

In an industry as tumultuous as this one in 2025, the capacity to go somewhere 'relatively unexplored' – in Kingsley's words – feels like it's limited to small independent devs and a few unicorns: your Valves, your Larians. Your Rebellions? Could be. To me, the studio is still just 'the *Sniper Elite* guys', but if *Atomfall* hits hard, and is as strange and interesting as my time with it promised, maybe it'll join those rarefied ranks. ■

BELOW: You can kill pretty much anyone, even seemingly plot-critical NPCs.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.
Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.
Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.
Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.
Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

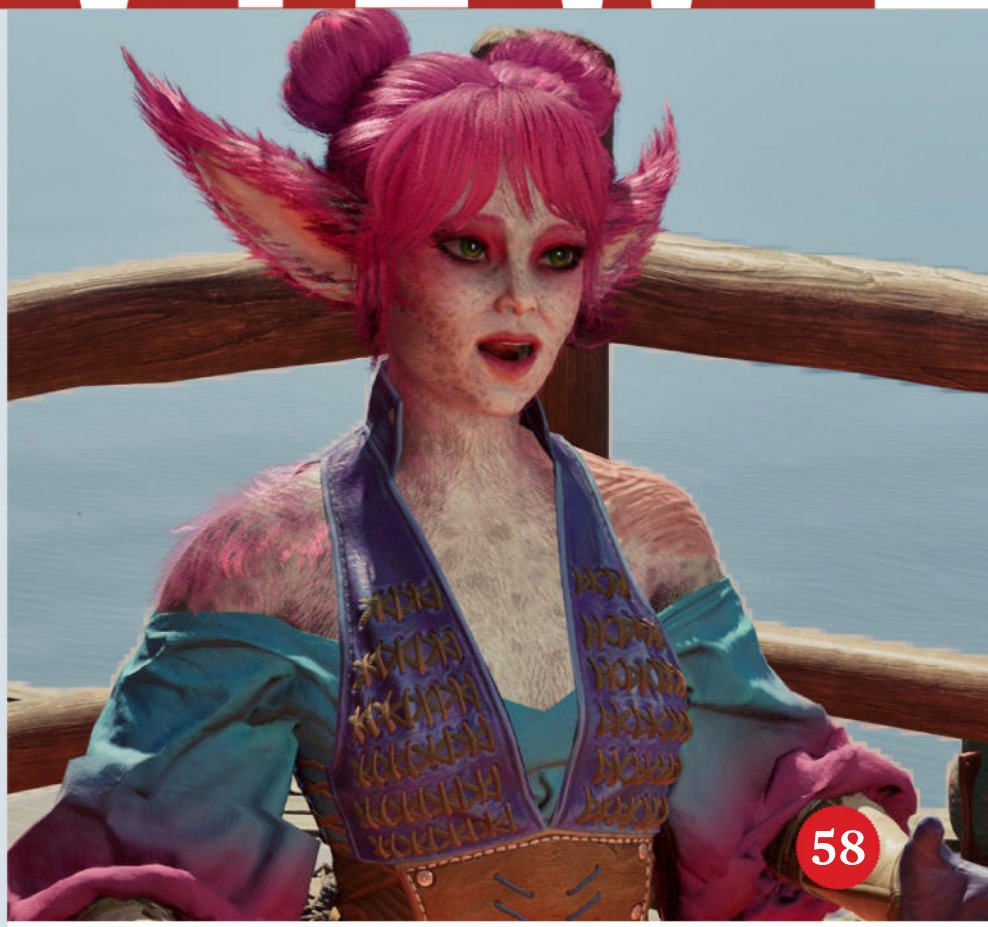
90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.
Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

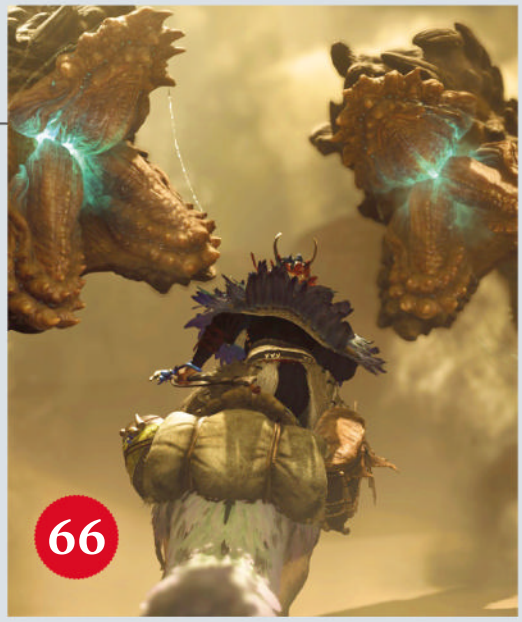
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



Dead good

How pleasant it is to see that *Avowed* is not just a good RPG but one that seems to have a sustained future. Indeed, what we're hearing right now, from PC PowerPlay's inside agent The Spy no less, is that the *Avowed* dev team hopes to stay together and continue working on the game. No details have yet been forthcoming as to if that just means patches, or something more ambitious like an expansion, but it feels like good news for Obsidian and for PC gamers.

Because *Avowed* is far from perfect, as our review this issue shows. It's a fun, streamlined, narrative focused fantasy action-RPG with good writing, but it's rough around the edges and its world is unfortunately rather dead and non-reactive. we feel that after another year or so of work it'll be great.



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81 **Babel.exe**
81 Lowland Keepers

This month's mentally broken reviewers...

SHAUN PRESCOTT
Specialist in
Scratching Orlan ears
Currently playing
Avowed
This month
Walked into people's homes and stole stuff totally unhindered. Oh, and in *Avowed* he...

ABBIE STONE
Specialist in
Bottles of rum
Currently playing
Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii
This month
Sailed around her local park's pond on a body board stealing bread from ducks. Quackers!

ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Buttcrack spandex
Currently playing
Marvel's Spider-Man 2
This month
Swung around the streets of Bath while covering people in sticky excretions.

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Stealing toys
Currently playing
Cataclismo
This month
Built a huge wall out of Mega Bloks around PCPP Towers to keep out console gamers.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
SpongeBob's pants
Currently playing
Octodad: Dadliest Catch
This month
Told dad jokes, like: what do you get if you cross a cat and a squid? An octopuss!

Avowed

ORLAN NOTHING

Though humble and a little old-fashioned, **AVOWED** is classic Obsidian

By Shaun Prescott

In mid-2023, a few prophetic indie developers warned on social media that the imminent launch of *Baldur's Gate III* was going to raise expectations for future RPGs to unrealistic heights. Now, in early 2025, I'm here to say that, sadly, they were right: I'm compelled to point out right off the bat that *Avowed* is not *Baldur's Gate III*, nor is it *STALKER 2*, nor is it *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II*.

It's not *Fallout: New Vegas*, either. No, it's a much more old-fashioned kind of thing. Avowed is undeniably a product of the studio responsible for *The Outer Worlds* and – most relevant in this case – *Pillars of Eternity*. It spins a gripping fantasy yarn, balancing existential severity with arch humour, while retaining that most enduring and fascinating Obsidian quirk: this is an admirably flawed achievement. It succeeds as an action game, it excels as a choice-based narrative game, but with the criteria determining what makes a brilliant RPG having so dramatically shifted of late, it doesn't feel like a standout RPG in 2025. Its world, though beautiful, is simply too static – not as malleable or reactive as some of its contemporaries, nor even the classics it recalls.

I am an envoy of the Aedyr emperor, sent to the notoriously dangerous Living Lands to investigate the Dreamscourge. This 'soul plague' sends people and animals mad while blighting them with actually-quite-stylish technicolour body fungi. The virus is spreading fast, so my nameless, voiceless and fully-customisable envoy must put a nip in its fungal bud before it spreads to the Aedyr empire proper.

I'm hated and feared by the races who have planted flags across the island

As an envoy for a powerful empire hoping to claim dominance over the Living Lands, I'm both hated and feared by the races who have planted flags across the island. But that's not the only special thing about me: I'm also a Godlike, which means I'm blessed by a god, boast gnarly divine abilities, and am also marked by fungi signalling my connection to divinity, though without the 'going mad' component. I'm also, importantly, harangued by strange voices in my dreams. The character creator is complete with all the lip and ear-size sliders you could want, and if the fungus creeps you out (like some members of the PC PowerPlay team) it can be toggled off entirely.

As the narrative unfolds, *Avowed* evolves from a fantasy-flavoured political potboiler into something verging on Dantean: there are ancient gods, forgotten races and many bewildering philosophical rants. I begin as a mere messenger, but things inevitably get way out of hand, as they surely must in a game that obliquely traverses a lot of thematic terrain – colonialism, encroaching totalitarianism, environmental disaster – without ever feeling heavyhanded. Obsidian is good at writing fantasy. With *Avowed*, it has a world already substantiated across two meaty CRPGs, and people who played the *Pillars of Eternity* games will be amply rewarded with callbacks and lore. I for one loved reacquainting with the weirdly cute Xaurips and Sporelings (before killing them).

As unwieldy as the setup may seem on paper, *Avowed* maintains an admirable focus during its 50-odd hours. I never lost track of what was happening. And I thought I would, given this is a game with a dynamic glossary accessible mid-conversation, à la *Final Fantasy XVI*. Across a handful of discrete 'open zones', Obsidian weaves a compact critical path between a wealth of fascinating sidequests that, while ostensibly optional, feel like the substance of the game.

EORA MISSION

Like in all the best RPGs, it's not the world you hope to save that matters,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person fantasy action RPG written with typical Obsidian flair

EXPECT TO PAY
$119

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

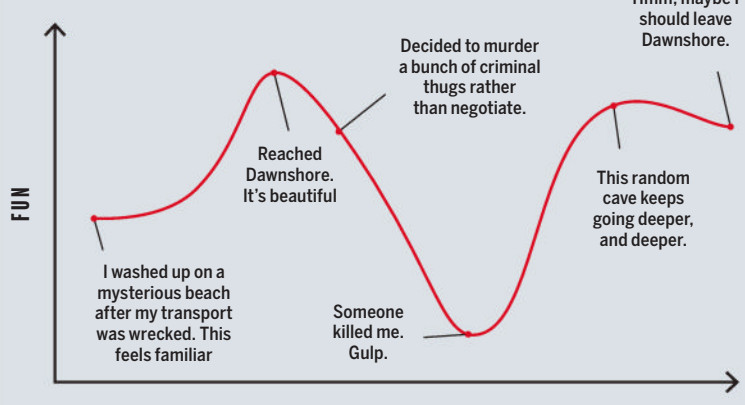
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
avowed.obsidian.net

THE FIRST TEN HOURS IN AVOWED

Charting my mood in the Living Lands


FUN
I washed up on a mysterious beach after my transport was wrecked. This feels familiar
Reached Dawnshore. It's beautiful
Decided to murder a bunch of criminal thugs rather than negotiate.
Someone killed me. Gulp.
This random cave keeps going deeper, and deeper.
Hmm, maybe I should leave Dawnshore.

but the frivolous jobs you do along the way. I remember a dubious situation between a Paradis woman and her weirdly adoring Xaurip admirers more vividly than any of the major plot beats. Likewise, visiting my companion Marius' vanquished home village, crouched in the shadow of a giant volcano, was more impactful than finally confronting the fascistic antagonist for the first time. I was more proud of saving a brothel in Paradis than I was of deciding to have mercy on a villain who I really ought to have, in retrospect, killed. These sidequests shouldn't be missed, and in truth cannot be, because focusing on the main quest at the expense of the XP and steady upgrade materials they provide probably won't be feasible for most players.

Marius is one of four companions, and like the others, he's familiar: a diminutive foul-mouthed tough guy with a golden heart. Early favourite Kai is the sardonic but sincere Garrus-like (voiced by Brandon Keener of Garrus fame, coincidentally), while a later character – it may be a spoiler to say too much – is the sassy sexual innuendo enjoyer. And don't fear: there's a bookish, determinedly humourless companion too.

You've met these people before in other RPGs but they're nevertheless well-drawn, with stories and motivations of their own, and an almost unbelievable reservoir of random stuff to say at the campfire sites where I can lick my wounds, improve my gear, and mercilessly question them. Archetypal though they are, they feel alive.

Adventuring with this gaggle across the varied regions of the Living Lands is gratifying mainly because *Avowed* is a stunning game to look at. Each zone carries a distinct grandeur of its own, and whoever designed these landscapes did so with the sensibility of a cinematographer. It's common to turn a corner, or mount a crest, and bear witness to a perfectly framed vista that would have looked like overly ambitious concept art ten years ago. The discrete maps are dense with points of interest, whether caverns chiselling deep into the earth or ruins full of spoils. They don't feel like real spaces, but that's not because they feel like videogame spaces: they feel like dreamlike fantasy worlds dreamt up by paperback fantasy bonglords.

Each zone carries a distinct grandeur of its own

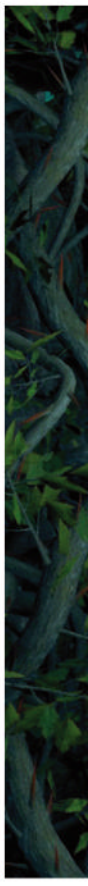
Avowed leaves a great first impression. Those first ten hours I spent in the sprawling city of Paradis and the wider Dawnshore region, learning about the Dreamscourge and life under the Aedyr colonisers, exploring surprisingly deep dungeons, shooting the shit with Kai, and making enemies with the local strongmen, put me in mind of the feeling of playing *New Vegas* or Oblivion for the first time, but better. Some of the missable sidequests, particularly in the first area, take me places other studios would want to frontload in the opening hours of the main quest. *Avowed* feels like a sumptuous embarrassment of riches. But while this is a very good game, with time I came to understand that its ambitions are a touch more humble than some recent genre heavyweights. I realised that it might be more flattering to think of *Avowed* as a choice-based narrative-driven action game. Or, as a certain kind of simplified blockbuster RPG that is fast receding in the medium's rear-view mirror.

DOOM INFERNAL

Let's talk about the fighting first. *Avowed* is surprisingly combat heavy, especially in its second half. It's possible to play with the usual array of melee weapons – swords, axes, spears, maces – but you'd be missing out on a lot if you're not playing *Avowed* like 21st century *Hexen*, mixing powerful ranged attacks with down-and-dirty close quarters hacking. Every one-handed weapon can be dual-wielded, so I normally roamed with a grimoire in one hand and a fire-enchanted sword in the other, raining down elemental area of effect attacks on bears, bugs and lizardmen before sprinting in to hack away. For the magic averse, it's also possible to muscle about with a mace in one hand and a pistol in the other, for example.

The grimoire is fun for all the flashing lights and mystical effects it conjures, but if magical pew-pew is more your bag there are wands too. Pistols and arquebuses are present too with all the slow reloading that entails, and so are bows. These conventional weapons have unlimited ammo, probably for magical reasons, but grimoires need essence (basically mana, in this context). Whichever route is taken, high mobility is key, standing still is death, and my envoy's impressive parkour abilities proved useful when manoeuvring around the hordes.

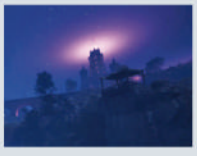
There are classes and backgrounds to choose from, but all skill trees – fighter, ranger, wizard, and godlike – are available to all classes, and I ended up with a fully blended build without feeling disadvantaged for not specialising. I can't change the gear used by my companions, but they steadily accrue special attacks I can trigger at any time. My crew is pretty good at using these specials themselves, but they're close to useless when it comes to moment-to-moment combat, except when I



THE LIVING LANDS

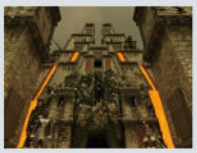
Exploring the four regions

DAWNSHORE
A semi-pastoral region home to the capital of Paradis. Beautiful, but rife with Xaurips. Lots of Xaurips.



EMERALD STAIR
Unofficial home of animancers and full of colourful fungi. Rife with Xaurips. Did I mention the Xaurips?

SHATTERSCARP
A dry, mountainous region that aumaua have settled. Dangerous, and rife with Xaurips.



GALAWAIN'S TUSKS
Beneath a giant volcano. Home to the mountain dwarfs (and, of course, Xaurips).

1: [Arcane Scholar] I see we've arrived at the "paranoid yokel" stage of the outbreak.
2: So you decided to check on me. How thoughtful.
3: Now that you mention it, I have been feeling a little sick.
4: [Crack your knuckles.]
Brentis: For all we know, you're one of those sick bastards. A plague carrier. A blight on our fair city.

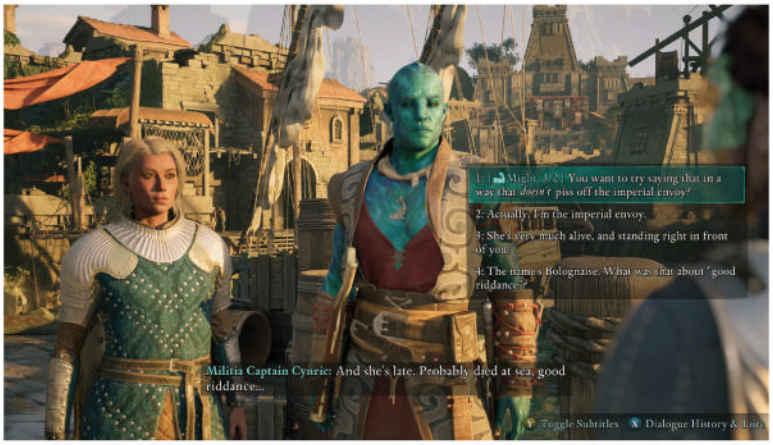
ABOVE: These overgrown bugs are endemic to the Living Lands; expect to down hundreds of them.

FAR LEFT: Don't let these paranoid yokel jerks get away with it (whatever "it" is).

An early highlight is the quest that takes you into a giant cave.

ABOVE: There are a heck of a lot of bears in the Living Lands, and most want to kill you.

FAR RIGHT: *Avowed* offers plenty of opportunities to be a prat, and shines for it.



Some of the vistas in *Avowed* look like old concept art.

revisit areas I'm way overpowered for.

Each quest has a difficulty ranking, not based on my level but on the power of the weapons and gear I'm using. The system is pretty vague: while gear is graded along typical RPG lines, I usually had to mix-and-match a bunch before a three-skull difficulty ranking de-escalated to two, mostly blindly, because there aren't any Destiny-style numbers to crunch. Upgrading gear is essential, because finding viable weapons is rare and usually relegated to sidequests or off-the-beaten path destinations. In the early game I found a unique one-handed fire sword that I went on to use right until the end, mostly because I can toggle between two loadouts on the fly, swapping fire for an ice mace and a shock-focused grimoire.

I don't think *Avowed*'s combat could sustain my attention over the course of a linear, 15-hour action game, but as one of the main components in a story-led, exploration-rewarding RPG, it's a lot more fun than I had dared hope for.

Performance was a little shaky on my increasingly long-in-the-tooth gaming laptop. With an RTX 3060, Ryzen 5600H and 16GB RAM, I obviously had no chance of smoothly running raytracing, but even at 1080p and low settings the framerate frequently dropped down to the 30s and 40s when I was in busy areas. The good news is that even at these settings *Avowed* is gorgeous, though low-quality shadows were a little over-obvious in places, and distant reflective surfaces acquire a weird opaque texture.

IMMERSIVE SIMPLE

But *Avowed* isn't just a first-person action game, and after a while the artifice of its RPG systems started to show. These limits first became apparent when I, a lowly thief, realised I can rob people blind with no consequences at all. It's possible to just enter some public figure's house, have a look around, open their chests and lockboxes, rob them of their coins, and the worst I'll receive is a mild scolding.

Nothing happens in this world unless I'm invited to make it happen

When I'm not in conversation with someone, that someone forgets that I'm there. Nothing happens in this world unless I'm invited to make it happen or I'm bearing witness to it. This doesn't make *Avowed* bad – I loved it – but it's symptomatic of one area where it falls short compared to its contemporaries, not to mention the first-person Bethesda games it's clearly modelled on. I can't attack anyone at will and suffer the consequences (though the narrative stages ample opportunities for me to kill or have mercy). Likewise, while stealth is an option, it's usually just a means to get an upper hand on a particular foe. Once I've attacked – whether from cover or using an invisibility spell – every baddie in the vicinity knows I'm there.

Where agency exists it's in the conversation trees, and Obsidian makes good in this regard. As in *Pillars of Eternity*, usually my important choices are between two undesirable outcomes, or between lesser and greater evils. Moral ambiguity usually amounts to whether something bad will happen now, or whether it might happen at a more severe scale later. Decisions culminate in fun ways, especially towards the end where sidequests and the critical path cleverly intersect. Nevertheless, it all builds towards a climax that, while satisfying, loses some of the ambiguity that seems to define the series.

It's the choices that don't matter a lot that I really enjoyed: *Avowed* let me hoist my snark flag at high mast, and it's possible to be very cheeky during otherwise very stern occasions, which always made me laugh. I can be an arsehole, I can be flippant, I can speak with sagacity or well-meaningly, or I can safely opt for the answer that suits the background I chose at the beginning of the game. It's possible to build a certain kind of envoy, even if, in the end, all it amounts to is guided head canon.

SYSTEMS SHOCK

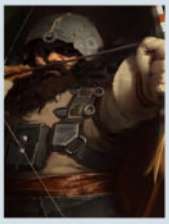
Avowed is a better RPG than *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* in almost every meaningful way, ranging from the meandering depth of its companion conversations through to the nuance of its worldbuilding and its willingness to get extremely dark at times. But when I look at them side-by-side I see RPGs made for audiences at scale, at a time when RPGs made for dorks and weirdos are having much more success. I really hoped that Avowed would remove the blockbuster guardrails the way recent genre heavyweights have.

Perhaps that's not the kind of game *Avowed* wants to be; it definitely succeeds on the somewhat humbler terms of a narrative-driven action RPG with memorable characters, a gorgeous world, and really fun combat. Just imagine if one day, these separate Obsidian tracks – spicy, reactive CRPGs and sumptuous first-person narrative adventures – perfectly intersect. ■

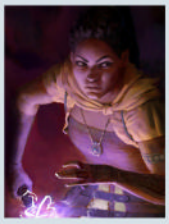
COMPANION QUEST

The company you'll keep in The Living Lands

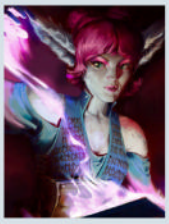
KAI
A dry-humoured and kind-hearted aumaua with powerful melee chops and a gun.



MARIUS
A foul-mouthed ranger that thinks he's tougher than he is. Uses a bow.



GIATTA
A scholarly wizard with no sense of humour, but useful in combat. Zap!



YATZLI
Companiable orlan mage with a dirty sense of humour and great healing power.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Avowed is engrossing and gorgeous, though it lacks the complex systems of its most beloved contemporaries.

82

YARRKUZA

There's fun to be had with LIKE A DRAGON: PIRATE YAKUZA IN HAWAII

By Abbie Stone

My pirate ship is sailing through the Hawaiin seas, pursuing a speedboat. I successfully chase it into a Bond-villain style base, whereupon I continue the pursuit on foot, jumping over laser traps, fleeing a giant cannonball that rolls towards me Indiana Jones-style, and then finish up with a sword fight against a giant robot.

How can I possibly give a game that contains all that any less than a 100% score? Well... the 'boat chase' is just a cutscene, the lasers have to be jumped over with sticky platforming controls, that cannonball sequence is a quick-time event, and that giant robot also requires that crap jumping to reach its weak point.

You play as series favourite Goro Majima, suffering from gaming's billionth case of amnesia. Majima has barely regained consciousness before several pirates pick a fight with him. Fortunately, Majima has remembered that he's deadly with a knife, fast as hell, and great fun to brawl with.

There's blocking, dodging and parrying, but you won't have to worry about any of that, for a few hours at least– just focus on kicking the crap out of these pirates as magnificently as possible.

CHOPPY WATERS

Hawaii's seas are broken up into several mini-areas rather than one open world, and they all look near-identical. A small collection of treasure islands, lighthouses for fast travel, rival ships dotted around, and speed rings that make you go faster when you sail through them. You'll want to stick to those rings as much as possible, too, because your ship moves painfully slowly.

Majima has to help his crew take out as many pirates as possible

Standard difficulty is laughably unchallenging, with any ships you chance across going down in a few hits. Things liven up when a subplot involving mightier ships is introduced and you can sail to specific points to take them on. But there's so little danger during the commute. *Black Flag* felt dangerous because mighty ships could suddenly emerge when you were exploring, or the authorities would show up if you sank too many vessels. There's none of that here.

A pity, because the major ship battles do still capture that *Yakuza* combat OTT magic. Realism has been booted overboard in favour of flamethrower cannons, laser beams, machine guns that fire ship-freezing bullets, etc. Here *Yakuza* is on far stronger footing, as Captain Majima has to help his crew take out as many pirates as possible. Luckily, he's got his new Sea Dog fighting style. This comes with two cutlasses that he can frisbee into crowds of grunts and that'll boomerang back to him. He has a grappling hook, perfect for closing the gap with distant enemies. And he even has a pistol if you'd prefer to keep that distance and just fire away. There are also special moves and magical instruments that can summon ghost sharks (yep).

Lethal as you are, you're still going to struggle without a decent crew. Luckily, Hawaii is full of people who are surprisingly keen to follow an amnesiac weirdo into a life of piracy. You soon make port at Honolulu City, the setting of last year's *Yakuza 8*, which is full of side quests and characters that can be recruited. Highlights include a PR manager who's trying to detoxify a pirate captain's image.

Still, you're then basically playing a *Yakuza 8* expansion pack. The identical minigames and city layout mean it struggles to feel fresh. We've just been to Hawaii, and a full-priced game is a pretty cheeky ask for such a similar return trip. There's fun to be had here, but if Sega is going to keep releasing spin-offs that recycle so much content at full price, it might soon inspire a different kind of videogame piracy. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Yakuza* spin-off on the Hawaiian seas that's a little too reminiscent of *Yakuza 8*

EXPECT TO PAY
$99.95

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12500H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060

STEAM DECK VERIFIED
Yes

MULTIPLAYER
No

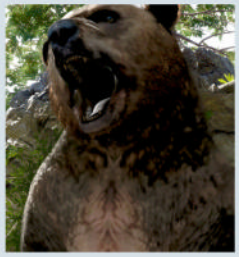
LINK
store.steampowered.com/agecheck/app/3061810

FRIEND AND ENEMIES

You might bump into these guys

NOAH
An adorable ten-year-old moppet who teams up with Majima. Oh God no.

KEITH
The first pirate you face rejoices in a name that's hilariously unthreatening.

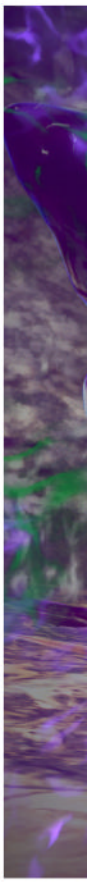


A BEAR
Sorry wildlife fans – this series hasn't lost its love of fighting beasts.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Like A Dragon: Pirate Yakuza In Hawaii is flawed and overfamiliar, but still as joyously OTT and hilarious as ever.

70



Michiko-sss
The state of the world, I swear. Developers sweat and toil for slave wages, all for rich brats to skip the tutorials and talk over cutscenes! Oh, my heart goes out to them!

FAR LEFT: There are occasional fun conversations to be had at sea. But not enough of them.

BELOW: This mystical violin summons ghost sharks, and there are three more magical instruments to find too.

GUILD CERTIFIED

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS is raw dragonslaying delight – crashes notwithstanding

By Lincoln Carpenter

M*onster Hunter Wilds* is a return to meat-and-potatoes monster combat and a dramatic revision of the hunting format. It's a more approachable lizard-slaying sandbox, and it's a tangle of multiplayer quirks that still feels like something out of 2007. It's the cleanest *Monster Hunter* has ever played, and it's a temperamental piece of software that might crash if you tab back in at the wrong time.

If there's a word for *Wilds*, it's streamlined. A more straightforward, cinematic story, gives way to a seamless wilderness of rotating seasons and roaming beasts, where any hunting prep can be done in the moment and on the fly. It can feel like a wonder, but it's not a wonder without cost. In providing as much monster hunting as possible, *Wilds* has carved away some of *Monster Hunter*'s charm.

But god, it feels good to fight those lizards. Throughout my almost 70 hours with *Wilds*, I could feel all 20 years of iteration behind its combat design. The latest round of tinkering with *Monster Hunter*'s 14 weapon types is a feast for every style of wyvern-slayer. Next to the flashy new attacks and Focus Strike finishers, there's a subtler artistry in design here that's easy to overlook. Small, considered tweaks make *Wilds* the smoothest *Monster Hunter* fighting has ever felt without sacrificing its meaty texture.

I could feel all 20 years of iteration behind its combat design

TRADE TOOLS

Each weapon feels like it's been through its own shonen training arc. My beloved hammer has never been more of a mobile wrecking ball. It's been blessed with Mighty Charge, a heavy charge attack that provides both a brutal finishing blow for capping off combos and a smooth pivot point for sliding into my next sequence of hits.

However, just seeing another player's weapon in action is enough to test my loyalties: one look at a Dual Blades user twirling around the field like a blood-crazed Beyblade had me making some abrupt changes to my gear crafting plans.

Feeding into all those weapon updates is the new Focus Mode and wound system. Targeting and destroying wounds with Focus Strikes is a satisfying new layer for moment-to-moment hunting. Opening a glowing red weak spot provides some clear direction if you don't know where a monster's most vulnerable, and the hefty chunk of damage gives me a reason to break up my bread-and-butter combos.

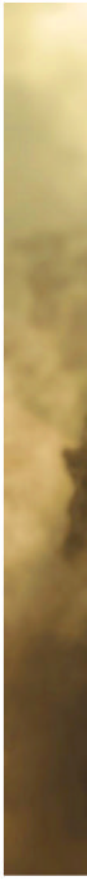
WILD WORLD

But what good are weapons without monsters to fight? For my money, Capcom sits firmly at the pinnacle of making impossible creatures look, sound and move believably, and *Wilds* brings some spectacular additions to the *Monster Hunter* bestiary.

Rey Dau is an early highlight: a barbed apex predator that carves molten arcs in the desert sand with its lightning-charged wing blades. Fighting Arkveld, *Wilds*' flagship monster, is like duelling an avalanche; it's an onslaught of lashing chains and eruptions of blood-red energy.

They're not just fun to look at. They're fun to learn. When I give a Doshaguma extra space after it slams the ground because I know it's just the start of a worse attack, Capcom's tricked me into a kind of roleplay. Like my hunter, I'm not just fighting monsters – I'm studying them. It's that old *Monster Hunter* magic: just by familiarising myself with the game, I'm deepening the fantasy.

Wilds is a leaner, streamlined *Monster Hunter*, and nowhere is that more clear than in the game's core story. Forgoing the traditional Hunter Rank progression, the first dozen hours of *Wilds* are a tight, cutscene-driven hunting tour of the Forbidden Lands, a region that's been closed off for a thousand years. It's a smart change of pace for settling into the rhythm of monster hunting, steadily doling out the basic systems of



NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action game about fighting giant lizards and turning them into pants

EXPECT TO PAY
$104.95

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 14700KF, 32 GB RAM, GeForce RTX 4070 Super

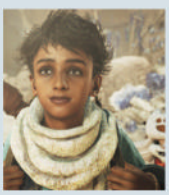
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
monsterhunter.com

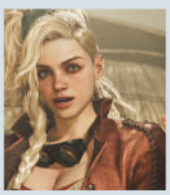
HUNTING PARTY

Your friendly faces in the Forbidden Lands

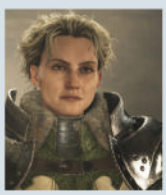
ALMA
TRUST GUILD HANDLER
Likes: Tea; anthropology; authorising monster slaying; wearing glasses.



NATA
FORBIDDEN LANDS LOCAL
Dislikes: His village being destroyed.
Likes: Processing emotions about his destroyed village.



GEMMA
BASE CAMP BLACKSMITH
Likes: Forging, Wyvern Fire weapon technology; monster plushies; exposed midriffs.



OLIVIA
ACE HUNTER SQUAD LEADER
Likes: Self-improvement; hammers; hitting things with hammers.

How did this photo of two console gamers get in here?

FAR LEFT: Finally, you can stand atop your slain quarry in triumph.

BELOW: A bad day looks like two sandworms.

ABOVE: See that mountain? You can kill a wyvern there.

BELOW: *Wilds* brings a noticeable bump in cinematic flair.

crafting, cooking and gathering through a sequence of story hunts.

Monster Hunter's sudden cinematic turn isn't exactly a narrative masterpiece, but there's a lot I like about the writing. Unlike previous *Monster Hunter*s, the *Wilds* protagonist is a fully voiced character, and a veteran hunter already in the prime of their career when the game starts. They're familiar with monster ecology and Guild procedure, meaning that in the cutscenes Capcom can show how the Guild operates and positions itself in the world.

SEASONAL AFFECT

What baffled me about Low Rank, though, is how it handles the new season system. Each region cycles through three seasons that influence monster spawns, endemic life, and resource availability: a Fallow season where the environment is depleted and hungry predators stalk the fields, an Inclemency period where massive storms sweep the landscape, and a season of Plenty where the ecology is renewed and revitalised.

The seasonal cycle produces some stunning visuals. When Inclemency hits the Windward Plains, the onset of a raging lightning storm makes any desert battle with a Doshaguma feel climactic. When the Scarlet Forest blooms into Plenty, it becomes a lush, vibrant Eden – if Eden had a healthy population of violent megafauna.

Problem is, you see very little of those seasonal shifts at first, because they're tied to story progression. You spend most of your story hunts in each region's Fallow season, only getting a taste of Plenty before being bounced to the next locale. As a result, my first dozen hours were spent seeing the environments at their dingiest. It's a shame, especially when the detail in *Wilds*' monster designs really pops in Plenty season.

Seamless hunting make for a festival of back-to-back monster battles

Once you hit High Rank, *Wilds* becomes a freeform hunting playground. High Rank pairs the traditional *Monster Hunter* progression with seamless hunt transitions, deployable camps, and a mobile guild handler – all designed to remove as many barriers as possible between me and my next target.

Starting a hunt can be as simple as walking out of camp and landing a few hits on the nearest beast. If I want to roll right into another hunt after bagging that Balahara, or if I'd rather do some light exploring and scoop up some lizards in my capture net along the way, I can stay out in the wilderness indefinitely. As someone approaching my tenth year of playing *Monster Hunter*, finishing a quest without being booted back to the hub feels a bit like witchcraft.

Those seamless hunting systems make the Forbidden Lands a festival of back-to-back monster battles, and I've been more than happy to indulge – but at the same time, it's that streamlining where I worry *Monster Hunter* is in danger of sanding down too much of its own identity. Take the Seikret, for example. I love my raptor horse and the lovely green plumage I gave it. The mid-hunt weapon switching it lets me do is great when I want to sever a tail that my hammer can't cut. But the Seikret underlines how much of the actual hunting has fallen out of *Monster Hunter*.

There's no need to find a monster any more. As soon as I hop in the saddle, my Seikret will start ferrying me to my quest target, even if I haven't seen it. With immediate access to high-speed raptor autopilot, *Wilds*' new biomes feel smaller than the *Worlds* maps I traversed on foot.

LOST TRACKS

My opinion might change when I'm on my sixth hunt for Rey Dau parts in a row, but I can't deny that I find myself yearning for the days of combing the Ancient Forest for Anjanath tracks.

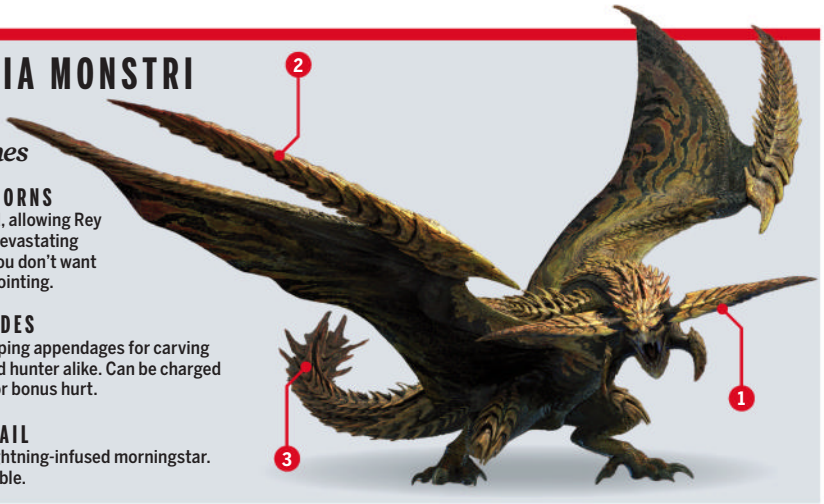
My hunting tastes might've been defined by an earlier era, but that won't keep me from appreciating *Wilds*' multiplayer improvements. Playing with your friends still has a clunkiness to it, but being able to form 'link parties' that simplify hopping into each other's hunts, regardless of what lobbies you're in, is a welcome update.

Unfortunately, even though *Wilds* made it easier to join up with friends, my hunting sessions have been interrupted by crashes. My PC's within the recommended specs, and in terms of framerate, the game runs great – but that hasn't prevented frustratingly frequent loading screen crashes. I'm not the only member of the PC Gamer team to deal with crashes, though I've had the worst luck with them. Until a patch arrives, I'm seemingly at risk of smash cutting to desktop whenever I try to join a friend's hunt.

Monster Hunter Wilds feels like a turning point. Updates like Focus Strikes add promising new dimensions to a indulgent combat design, and its seamless hunts and shifting seasons push the series closer to realising a living ecology for its monsters. Without more room for *Monster Hunter*'s history, it's a wilderness that's missing a soul. ■

ANATOMIA MONSTRI

Rey Dau's danger zones



1 RAILGUN HORNS
Snap forward, allowing Rey Dau to charge a devastating lightning blast. You don't want to be where it's pointing.

2 WING BLADES
Sharp, sweeping appendages for carving through earth and hunter alike. Can be charged with electricity for bonus hurt.

3 BARBED TAIL
A built-in, lightning-infused morningstar. Mercifully severable.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Monster Hunter Wilds' best-in-class monster combat makes up for a wilderness that's a touch too streamlined.

85

ROOT CAUSE

Solving a genealogical mystery in THE ROOTTREES ARE DEAD

By Tom Sykes

They say detective work is primarily about sitting in front of a computer, and if so, have I got the desktop for you. Armed with Nut OS 1.1, the Cashew PC offers speedy net surfing and thorough database searching – all without the bloat of a modern Windows machine, or the sluggishness of a genuine late '90s PC. It's the main tool in your arsenal in *The Roottrees are Dead*, a game about filling in a massive, tangled family tree.

In the wake of a recent tragedy, which has claimed the lives of the current president of the Roottree Candy Company, along with his wife and three daughters, you've been hired by a mysterious client to chart the Roottree dynasty in incontestable black and white. That means combing through fictional websites, library books and periodicals, for the facts required to pin them down on your big, conspiracy-style cork board.

Sure it's easy enough to uncover the names of the three sisters that died in the crash – they are plastered all over the internet – plus their professions and a photo each to 'lock them in'. But what about their parents? And the parents of their parents' parents? You have 90 years of this stuff to dig up, so get going.

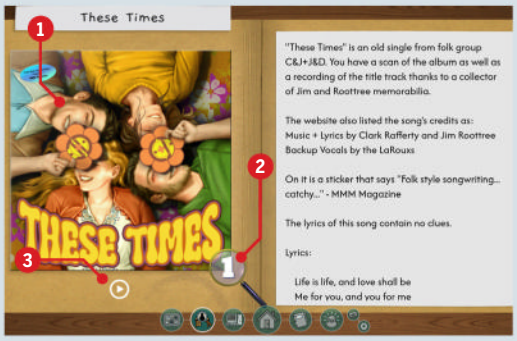
Every time you find a clue – if you even noticed it, as they can be cleverly buried – you have a number of avenues to turn to. There's the evidence on your evidence desk: relevant photos and documents you'll return to, time and again, to cross-reference new information. But your main port of call is the internet, which – just as in 1998 – has exactly three sites of note.

Your main port of call is the internet, which has exactly three sites

Fictional search engine SpiderSearch is useful for looking up the more famous Roottrees, while any books you have uncovered may be available from a central library database. Periodicals are also handy for digging up the titbits you need to complete an entry. I lost track of the number of times I had used the married rather than the maiden names of the Roottree spouses.

BODY OF EVIDENCE

Getting to the root of the problem


These Times
1
2
3
THESE TIMES
"These Times" is an old single from folk group C&J+J&D. You have a scan of the album as well as a recording of the title track thanks to a collector of Jim and Roottree memorabilia.
The website also listed the song's credits as: Music + Lyrics by Clark Rafferty and Jim Roottree Backup Vocals by the LaRouxs
On it is a sticker that says "Folk style songwriting... catchy..." - MMM Magazine
The lyrics of this song contain no clues.
Lyrics:
Life is life, and love shall be
Me for you, and you for me

1 A FACE IS WORTH...
You'll need to match these to people on the family tree. Easier said than done.

2 GOT YOUR NUMBER
Each document has a number, which tells you how many clues are still left to find. It's vague enough that it doesn't feel like cheating.

3 PLAY ON
A few bits of evidence even come with a song, recorded by the musicians featured in the game.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game in which you fill in a family tree. Much more exciting than it sounds

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.50

DEVELOPER
Robin Ward

PUBLISHER
Evil Trout

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2754380/The_Roottrees_are_Dead/

BLOODLINES

After every few successful entries, the game fades to black to pat you on the back, confirming your work by locking those entries in place. The game is essentially one giant puzzle – pretty daunting when you zoom out to a sea of question marks with no idea where to start – so it's best to take notes, whether in real-life or with the in-game notebook.

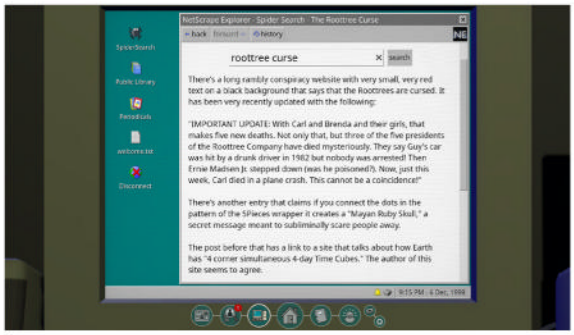
Speaking of that notebook, it's one of the niftiest notebooks ever made. Just one element of an interface that works its socks off to keep you immersed in the detecting flow state. Found a clue on a website, in a book, or in one of your evidence folders? Simply highlight it with the mouse for options to search for it on the internet, or to add it to your notebook. The game never feels fiddly, repetitive or time-consuming, and in a game about transferring information between menus repeatedly, that's no small feat.

I said much the same thing back when I reviewed the earlier, free version of *The Roottrees are Dead*, which is largely similar but neatly eclipsed by this paid remake. The AI-generated artwork of the original is thankfully gone, replaced by beautifully hand-drawn photos, magazine covers and promotional flyers, while the action has spread out from just your desktop to your entire living room. The corners of the room are dominated by your PC, your cork board, the evidence desk and the front door, which is where your client will pop up to progress the story. That's just one element bettered in this remake, which also comes with an expansion that deals with the fallout of the explosive ending of *The Roottrees are Dead*. ■

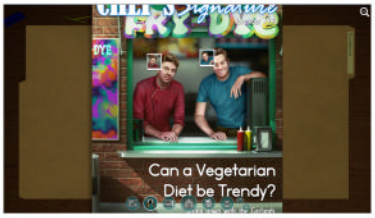
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A great detective game gets a lavish remake and an improved expansion in one essential package.

87


NetScape Explorer - Spider Search - The Roottree Curse
roottree curse
search
There's a long rambly conspiracy website with very small, very red text on a black background that says that the Roottrees are cursed. It has been very recently updated with the following:
"IMPORTANT UPDATE: With Carl and Brenda and their girls, that makes five new deaths. Not only that, but three of the five presidents of the Roottree Company have died mysteriously. They say Guy's car was hit by a drunk driver in 1982 but nobody was arrested! Then Ernie Madsen Jr. stepped down (was he poisoned?). Now, just this week, Carl died in a plane crash. This cannot be a coincidence!"
There's another entry that claims if you connect the dots in the pattern of the 5Pieces wrapper it creates a "Mayan Ruby Skull," a secret message meant to subliminally scare people away.
The post before that has a link to a site that talks about how Earth has "4 corner simultaneous 4-day Time Cubes." The author of this site seems to agree.

NEWSTime - 5Peez Issue
NEWSTime WEEKLY
Felix Fellowes
5Peez, aka Felix Fellowes, appeared on the cover of NEWSTime holding a photo of his mother and Guy Hudson. The article concerns his insistence that his father was Guy Hudson. The story was dramatic and sensational, and initially dismissed as fake, until a DNA test proved that he was related to Guy Hudson.
5Peez says that his mother Joanna was Zac Morden's secretary when he retired, and then Guy Hudson's secretary for only one or two weeks after that before she quit. (The first few weeks that he was president.) His parents divorced when he was 4, after his father learned of the affair. Felix and his mother then moved to Portland because she was afraid for her and her son's life.
He grew up with her until he was 16, but one day
Evidence



ABOVE: You get to know these characters through their deeds, and misdeeds.

FAR LEFT: Documents are summarised. You won't get bogged down in details.

BELOW: It's a hard game to screenshot. I think this one's spoiler-free.

SUPERFLUOUS

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2's PC port is a flawed version of a flawed sequel

By Robin Valentine

In its first *Spider-Man* game, developer Insomniac already got the most important thing right: the feel of being super-powered. That was most evident in the excellent traversal, which set a new high-water mark for web-swinging, but also in the smooth and agile combat. Where it struggled was in giving you anything interesting to do with all that power, its visually impressive but largely empty open world offering only tired old side activities and filler.

My hope was that this sequel would improve on the wider formula, creating a more interesting New York playground. Instead, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* not only still bears all the same flaws as its predecessor, but in many areas – particularly the storytelling – feels like a step backwards.

The setup is as straightforward as ever. You swing freely around New York, taking on side activities, or main story missions in the usual slick and cinematic vein of modern PlayStation exclusives. The big twist is that, where the first game starred Peter Parker and its spin-off starred Miles, this one has both.

Out in the open world, you're free to change at will, and though they're not wildly different mechanically, the two do feel impressively different thanks to top-notch animation work.

Where the two feel rather less balanced is in the game's story. Following their respective solo adventures they're now a crime-fighting duo, but both are predictably still struggling to juggle their superhero callings with their personal responsibilities.

The plot points are outlandish and Miles doesn't have enough to do

It's a tried and true setup for a Spider-Man story – the perils of leading a double life, making sacrifices to do the right thing, etc – but from there it becomes a pretty confused take on the black suit/Venom origin storyline, mashed together with a Kraven invasion and a tangle of other villains. The plot points are outlandish, the themes muddy and Miles doesn't really have enough to do. The real problem, though, is the characters.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A web-swingin' superhero sequel

EXPECT TO PAY
$94.95

DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games, Nixxes Software

PUBLISHER
PlayStation Publishing LLC

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

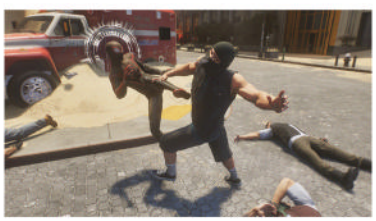
LINK
marvel.com/games/marvels-spider-man-2

SUPER ZEROES

In a story ultimately all about the emotional stakes and the cast's relationships with each other, the actual personalities are remarkably flat. Almost everyone fills essentially the same role, and the addition of Miles' supporting cast means there's twice as many of them.

Dialogue has this odd faux-wholesome tone, like you're trapped in a corporate training video – all careful politeness and empty one-liners. Even in emotional outbursts and tense confrontations, there's no edge to anyone or any sense of an inner life.

The majority of the side activities wind up feeling both mechanically and narratively pointless. An electric bike race feels silly enough in a *Spider-Man* game, but when the stakes are just, "I need someone to try out my electric bike," it's hard not to think that Miles and Peter have more pressing stuff to do. It makes those excellent core fundamentals carried over from the first game feel wasted – I find myself traversing the



ABOVE: I can't fault the photo mode, which lets you capture every jaw-breaking blow from the perfect angle.

TOP: Combat is punchy and fun, but weighed down by a flood of new powers and options.

ABOVE: When being Spider-Man feels this good, why does the game keep making me remote-control drones instead?

city aimlessly, loving how it feels just to swing around but with nothing to swing towards.

That is, when I can actually play. Though hotfixes are flying thick and fast as I finish this review, for me the patches have so far failed to tackle frequent crashes to desktop. While others have seen wide-ranging performance issues, for me the game runs smoothly, until it suddenly doesn't, giving up the ghost every 30 minutes on average.

Having to reload the game twice an hour has made it all the harder to feel excited and invested in what should be a thrill-a-minute experience. Insomniac Games created something remarkable in the first game: perhaps the best feeling videogame superhero ever. But the studio only seems to have less and less idea of what to do with him.

On PS5 in 2023, *Spider-Man 2* at least served as an impressive technical showcase for the hardware, and a blockbuster game in a relatively quiet release schedule. On PC in 2025, without those advantages and in a disappointingly shaky state, it's much more difficult to recommend. ■

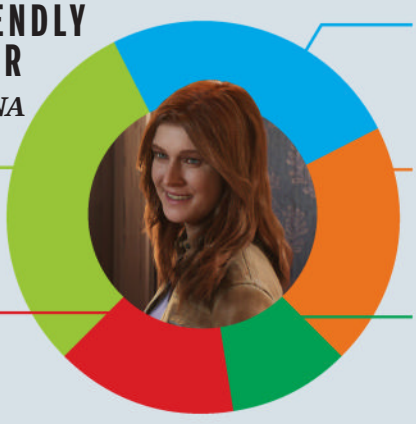
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Spider-Man 2's cinematic spectacle is undermined by toothless writing, a dull open world, and ropey port work.

57

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR

Character DNA



25% SUPER INTELLIGENT
Perfect expertise in science or tech, preferably.

20% DOORMAT
Ready to help 24/7, until the one scene where they act aggrieved.

10% CHATTY
There's a reason the Spider-Men built phones into their masks.

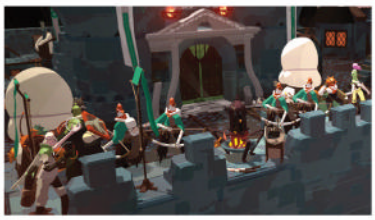
15% CHEESY
One-liner gags for every occasion, all pre-vetted by the HR department.

30% NICE
Always polite, always kind, always slightly dead behind the eyes.

RIGHT: That's Iris far left, the only unit with magical powers.

FAR RIGHT: Certain units prefer high ground, but it's costly building it.

BELOW: If the citadel falls, it's game over.



BUILDING BLOCKS

Is horde mode citybuilder CATACLISMO a towering achievement?

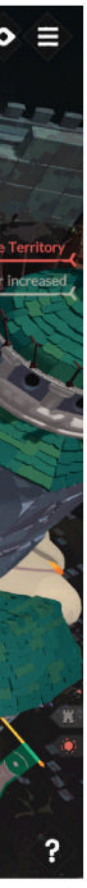
By Tom Sykes

C*ataclismo*'s been in Early Access since last year, and it's a testament to how well-realised the concept was that this is the same game, just with extra bits on. The biggest bits are the additional campaign missions, which round out the story of Iris, the mystical overseer on a mission to save humanity from the Horrors. It's not a huge campaign, but the environments, units and structures are beautiful and the world is dripping with atmosphere.

The game's hook is just as strong as it prepares to exit Early Access. You citybuild (and tower defend) by building your defences brick by brick, as if you're playing with the iconic Mega Bloks. The best part of the game is hearing the blocks slot together, and their anxious wobbling as you're about to tear them apart. The focus of most missions is on manually building structures to defend your base, decorating them with costly embellishments including fire arrows and inspirational banners, and finally staffing them with units trained in the local barracks. When the horde attacks on that first night, you can then sit back, sip your brandy and marvel at your idiocy as they find that wall you forgot to strengthen.

These building mechanics allow for plenty of flexibility and creativity. But you're limited by your supplies, and that you might not want to spend two hours on pause creating a masterpiece that will disappear at the end of the mission. Sandbox mode is included for all you Liechtensteins wishing to make big, outlandish castles out of infinite resources. But whichever mode you build on, it's with one of the slickest, most legible interfaces you'll find in any game.

Also added is the incredible rebuild tool, which instantly repairs damaged fortifications – if you have the resources to do so – by remaking them exactly as they were. This feature is probably the low-key biggest addition to the Early Access version, along with the community that has sprung up around it.



BRICK IN THE WALL

To my shame, I don't think I'd ever used the blueprint feature before diving into version 1.0, but it's a lifesaver when it comes to plopping down repeatable structures. Like everything else about the interface, it works how you expect it to, then you can plop down those stairs or that bit of wall with little effort. If you can't be bothered, the Steam Workshop is full of blueprints.

Building mechanics allow for plenty of flexibility and creativity

Crucially, you can only outsource small parts of your building work to the community, or your own blueprints, given how tactically you have to work round the given environment. Any hills or ruins already present on a map cannot be demolished or moved, and it's these natural obstacles that give each map its particular flavour. Overcoming the environment – planning the locations and shapes of your defences, and holding off the Horrors – is time-consuming, even with all these time-saving features, but it's still satisfying when your work pays off.

With a not terribly replayable campaign, it's *Cataclismo*'s alternate modes that will ultimately determine how invested you get. Into building castles? Hop onto Sandbox mode. How about tackling interesting maps? Skirmish mode has you covered. The newly revamped Endless mode asks you to citybuild in a procedurally generated landscape, while gradually unlocking building blocks and more radical roguelite upgrades.

Endless is where *Cataclismo*'s full suite of blocks, units and monsters finally comes out to play. I mostly enjoyed following Iris' story, but it felt good to shirk off its overly enigmatic narrative and be left alone to fully develop a city, while having to make a series of interesting decisions. For example, one upgrade revealed the entire map, completely removing the fog of war, but with a drastic upkeep cost that I had to scrabble to maintain (and, ultimately, failed to).

In a way, Endless is the truest expression of *Cataclismo*'s building and survival mechanics, giving you the space and time to build what you want, while harshly limiting your resources to foster creative decision-making. It's a game that makes you put the effort in. But then Rome wasn't built in a day. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A citybuilding survival game in which you build all the walls, brick by brick

EXPECT TO PAY
$25.96

DEVELOPER
Digital Sun

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
digitalsungames.com/games/cataclismo

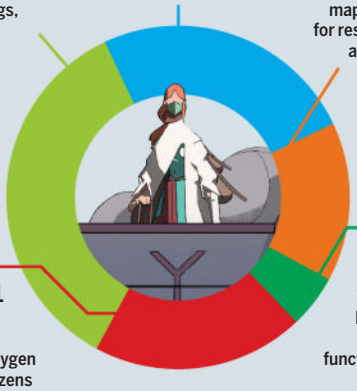
SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Which genres is Cataclismo building on?

35% CITYBUILDER
But you don't have to manually construct the city buildings, thankfully.

25% TOWER DEFENCE
Albeit with fewer towers and more walls to delay the Horrors while you attack them.

15% RTS
You'll take control of units to explore the map, searching for resource piles and monster nests.



5% CASTLE FLIPPER
While many blocks have tactical functions, some are purely decorative.

20% SURVIVAL SIM
You have to generate oxygen for your citizens to survive.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Cataclismo's exceptional building mechanics support a game that sometimes feels like a chore to play.

79

ABOVE: A runaway bride? Sounds like trouble.

FAR RIGHT: Unlock new skills to battle road events like speed cameras.

BELOW: Muddy roads, bikers, and traffic jams are just a few things slowing you down.

THUMBS UP

The road trip vibes are impeccable in turn-based RPG KEEP DRIVING

By Christopher Livingston

I grew up in a town with nearly no public transportation, so true freedom was only gained as a teenager when I got my first car. It was a hand-me-down from my grandfather, so it wasn't cool, but it was the only real escape from the drudgery of school, the oppression (real or imagined) of parents, and the growing panic that adulthood, which meant a job, the military, or more damn school, was waiting at the end of the summer.

Keep Driving is a turn-based road trip RPG that perfectly captures the freedom and possibilities of being young and having a beat-up old car, just enough money to fill it with gas and snacks, and only the vaguest of destinations in mind. Just like in real life, road trips in *Keep Driving* feel like a carefree summertime journey where you blast some tunes, eat junk food, and watch your troubles shrink in the rearview mirror – until that check engine light starts blinking, at least.

The game begins with the perfect excuse for a road trip: an old friend who lives all the way across the map has invited you to a music festival. With three months of summer stretching out before you, grab a few supplies from your house, open the map to pick a route, and start driving. Your car is your inventory: store useful stuff in the glove box, extra supplies in the trunk, and eventually people in the seats.

MAP QUEST

As you travel between any two map locations in *Keep Driving*, you encounter obstacles, called road events, that slow you down: mud puddles and potholes, traffic jams and biker gangs, and situations every driver has encountered at some point like 'vague lanes' or a bug that flew in the window and can't get out. These road events are *Keep Driving*'s version of turn-based combat, as each turn threatens to damage four different attributes: gasoline, cash, durability and your energy levels. To dispel them, you need to match the threats with pips on your skill cards or items in your glove box.

You'll encounter solo travellers making their own way

It's a simple combat system that's easy to grasp within a few tries, and while it never really gets any more complex, it requires a lot of preparation to survive. Most skill cards have only a few uses before they need to be replenished by sleeping in a town, and glove box items (like duct tape, which protects durability, and cigarettes, which prevent loss of energy) have limited uses before you'll need to buy more at rest stops and convenience stores.

As required for any memorable road trip, *Keep Driving* has an utterly kickass soundtrack. I'm not going to pretend I'm cool enough to have heard of Swedish indie bands like Westkust, Makthaverskan, Zimmer and Fucking Werewolf Asso, but they've got at least one new fan.

And then there are the hitchhikers. As you cross the map you'll encounter solo travellers making their own way through the world: a punk rocker with a dog (who takes up an extra seat), a young woman in a wedding dress who left her groom at the altar, a burnout who lost his job and is estranged from his wife, a mechanic who will smoke all your cigarettes. None of them have names, just labels you might use to describe a stranger: The Kid, The Songwriter, The Punk. I assume they think of me as The Driver.

At first hitchhikers feel like they're just a tool to employ in your road events, since each brings a unique skill card to the dashboard, but as you travel together they each slowly reveal more about themselves and their journeys through quick bits of text conversation. Drive with them long enough and they'll unlock new skills, and reveal their own quest you can choose to pursue. The Punk wants to go to a club town, so can you drop him off there? The Bride wants to let loose and have some fun. As they start to feel like friends, or at least the kinds of temporary friends you made out of necessity when you were exploring the world. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based road trip RPG set in the early 2000s

EXPECT TO PAY
$26.50

DEVELOPER
YCJY Games

PUBLISHER
YCJY Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

STEAM DECK
Playable

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2756920/Keep_Driving/

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Great characters, challenging resource management and impeccable road trip vibes.

90

USED CARS

Here are our favourite used vehicles in games

PACIFIC DRIVE
The station wagon may look dumpy but start strapping some sci-fi gizmos to it and you'll have a souped-up tank before you know it.

MY SUMMER CAR
Build it from hundreds of parts, maintain it, fix it, drive it, and don't forget to take care of yourself with a few sausages, too.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 2
It's got no doors or even a roof, but the two-seater comes with the perfect companion for a road trip.

FAR: LONE SAILS
OK, it's not a car, exactly, but it's not not a car either. Keep your not-car going in a memorable journey across a dried-out ocean.

FAINT ECHO

SYNDUALITY ECHO OF ADA aims to be many games all at once

By Dominic Tarason

S*ynduality Echo of Ada* at first looked custom-made for me. A third-person mech action game that takes the extraction shooter formula and twists it into something more social and accessible, with an unusual structure hiding a wealth of optional story tied into a recent anime series. It aims high, but an interesting concept can only take you so far, and the result feels like three half-finished games stapled together. I thought it was all building to something.

Synduality is (at least initially) an extraction shooter, inspired by the likes of *Escape From Tarkov*, but in lightweight mechs that remind me a bit of *Hawken*'s twitchy yet streamlined rumbling robots. You explore a hostile wasteland full of monsters and NPC bandits, collect loot, then try to bring it home to sell or craft into useful upgrades for your base. Normally it's a cutthroat genre that players treat as a high-stakes deathmatch where everyone's risking their best gear for a slight advantage over the competition. But *Synduality* aims to ease newcomers into the action by making co-op the default way to play.

While I had the occasional tussle that ended with an apology for reflexively shooting at another player, a friendly 'hello' emote was usually enough to defuse any tensions, letting me focus on hunting post-apocalyptic monsters and bandits, gathering treasure and slowly converting my hangar into a home.

It even has you install a bathroom so you can watch them bathe

I found the base renovations to be surprisingly fun. Between some lively animations and chatter from my Magus, there's a real sense that I was turning a ruined, rusted building into my home, with a couch and coffee table parked cutely in front of the mech repair platform. *Synduality* goes to great lengths to get you attached to your Magus, endlessly doting servant-partners reminiscent of Pawns from *Dragon's Dogma*. It even has you install a bathroom so you can watch them bathe in (work-safe) cutscenes... for a small in-game price per bath session. Yes, this anime game is very anime.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A mech-based extraction shooter and mid-tier anime tie-in

EXPECT TO PAY
$59.95

DEVELOPER
Game Studio Inc

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900K, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu/synduality

LOW ROLLER

Stakes are low. When I did die I could return to my fallen mech and recover everything, claiming both an insurance payment (around 80% of the lost gear's value) AND all my stuff, turning defeat into a lucrative and potentially exploitable misadventure. A curious design oversight, and sadly indicative of a slightly thoughtless whole.

Synduality's greatest failing is that the moment-to-moment combat is very flat. It's enjoyable in short bursts, with heftier movement than your average third-person shooter, but you're still running with a very standard loadout: a melee attack, a pair of uninspired guns, maybe a few grenades and a special power via your Magus. New mech chassis types only offer moderate stat boosts, no real interesting build options and very little visual customisation.

The choice to have the weak point on mechs be their back rather than the head is a nice tactical twist,

RIGHT: The worm-like Incubators are the coolest-looking enemy type. Just stay out of biting range.

TOP: Environments are often vibrant, varied and vertical. It's a pity that there are only two maps at present though.

FAR RIGHT: If you've had a streak of bad runs, you can always dip into your Magus' emergency savings.

making facing danger head-on the safer option. But unless you're a rogue player, PvP doesn't happen often. The tension of getting away with a good haul that so many extraction shooters rely on was absent, replaced with an almost *Animal Crossing*-like cosy loop of resource hunting and watching numbers go up. Not unpleasant, but hardly gripping.

SMALL WORLD

After 15 hours the cracks really began to show. I was still fighting the same five NPC enemy types and only rarely exchanging fire with human players. The missions weren't offering anything new. I was unlocking more seasonal battle pass rewards. This being a Bandai Namco game, you can buy battle pass levels or expensive premium outfits for your Magus, on top of the game's retail price. Standard enough for a live service game in 2025, but still exhausting.

After 20 hours I was tired of looping around the same two maps. *Synduality*'s goal to make extraction shooters more friendly is laudable, but once the novelty wears off, there's just not much here. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Synduality Echo of Ada has some smart ideas, but the end result is a misguided, hollow franken-game.

58

I, MOUTO

What your choice of Magus says about you

GRAU

You've watched too much anime, naturally gravitating towards demure 'little sister' types. Either that, or you're an aspiring Vtuber.

IBIS

You are refined, professional, and desperately seek the approval of a firm but caring motherly figure. You may be Char Aznable.

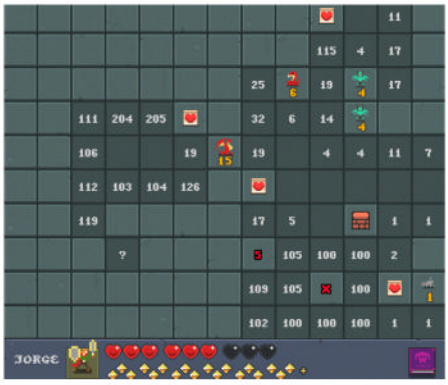
LOCKE

You seek to project onto a blank canvas with a cool hairstyle, but struggle to define yourself. You read too many Isekai manga.

GORDE

You long for the tender embrace of a perfect robot hunk that will never break your heart. You have an active AO3 account.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes



BOMBASTIC

Turning Minesweeper into a dungeon crawler with DRAGONSWEEPER

Like its inspiration, *Minesweeper*, *Dragonsweeper* is a game about intently staring at a big grid of numbers and making calculated gambles. Unlike *Minesweeper*, this is also an RPG. The mines are still here, of course – and clicking on one is still an instant game over – but they're joined by rats, slimes and, yes, a big dragon, who you're ultimately trying to defeat. Turns out that's pretty tough – even tougher than *Minesweeper*.

Dragonsweeper is tough because it's more cagy with its information. The numbers on the floor, as you would expect, tell you how many mines are hidden in the eight grid spaces surrounding them, but they also inform you how many (and which) of the D&D-style monsters are lurking in there as well. Each monster or mine is assigned a number, and by comparing revealed monsters/mines against the white numbers painted on the floor, you can figure out where to click without getting yourself eaten or blown up.

There are two things that up the challenge level, however. The first is that a lot of the floor is taken up by question marks, meaning you have no idea what might be lurking around them. The other is that enemies take a guaranteed chunk off your health bar when they die, so you can only click on them when you've levelled up a bit. You have to track down weaker enemies while avoiding the explosive mines, and tactically time every level up and potion to top-up your health.

I've realised it's not nearly as random as it might first appear

SWEEP & WEEP

I've played a lot of games of *Dragonsweeper* now, and after finally winning one I've realised it's not nearly as random as it might first appear. In fact, I don't think you ever need to make a guess, if you're patient enough. The clouds parted when I realised that certain numbers meant there were only mines and no monsters nearby, so I could click on the other cells without fear of revealing a baddie.

There's a lot of discourse among strategy fans about whether a spot of randomness is a good thing or not, but I think *Dragonsweeper* has found a nice balance. It gives you perfect information – but not quite enough of it, so you'll need to sit and think for ages before making your next move. The temptation is always there to throw caution to the wind and click on a mystery cell at random, and this can be genuinely exciting when you're deep into a game.

I tend to mix cavalier with cautious play, with more of the latter when I'm powerful enough to take on the dragon. You can either take him down and end the game, or try to clear the board first for a better score. That I keep coming back to *Dragonsweeper* is thanks to its puzzle design and its combo of *Minesweeper* with dungeon-crawling. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Minesweeper but with dragons and other monsters. The clue's in the name.

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Benmergui

PUBLISHER
Daniel Benmergui

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

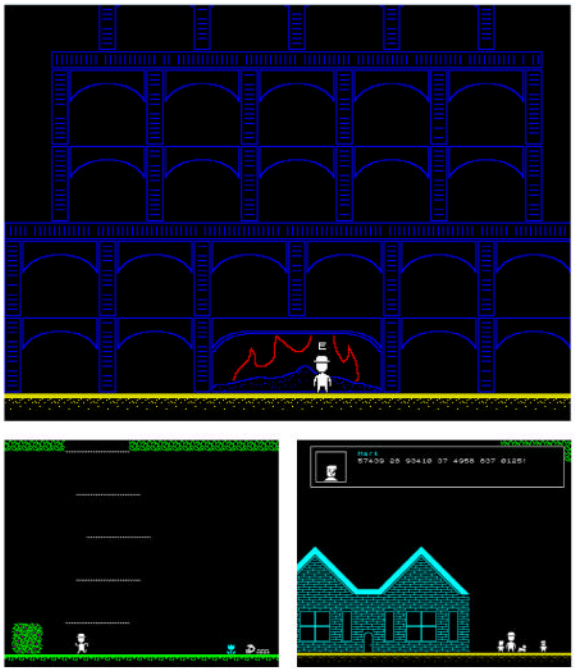
LINK
bit.ly/dragonsweeper

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Minesweeper has been taken to another level with this moreish reinvention of the Windows classic.

87

BELOW: It's styled after ZX Spectrum games.



LANGUAGE BARRIER

BABEL.EXE shows the power, and the danger, of words

The Tower of Babel has been reinterpreted as an enormous server tower in *Babel.exe*. Different communities have been brought together, with a program translating what they are saying to each other in real-time

As a helpful person in a hat, it's your job to fuel the big tower by collecting logs from the nearby woods, but also to help folks with their problems. Someone wants you to collect flowers, another some of those colourful berries. However, the woods are home to vicious snakes, spiders, frogs and, for some reason, big pits of spikes. Of course, you need instant death pits for a game to feel like a proper ZX Spectrum title.

Babel.exe's retro-style pixel art is my favourite thing about it. It's so economical, clean and instantly readable, with a certainty to its limited colour palette that plays well with the direction the story takes. It's clear that it's going to get dark, but I wasn't expecting the game to turn into a dark comedy.

I enjoyed the platforming, which is less cruel than an actual Speccy game by giving you infinite lives and letting you restart from the previous screen. The simplistic enemy AI and rigid physics might take a period of readjustment, but *Babel.exe*'s platforming doesn't feel outdated at all – proof that Speccy games just needed to chill out about punishing failure. Ultimately, your combat against the woodland beasties serves a greater narrative purpose, reinforcing the shocking developments of the second half. If language can bring us together, it can also tear us apart. This is one you don't want to miss. ■

76

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	GooseStranger	bit.ly/babelexe

CARD SHARP

LOWLAND KEEPERS is like mana from heaven

This deckbuilding roguelike peers into the guts of the genre and makes some big changes on a mechanical level. It's still a case of playing your cards to defeat or delay enemies before they can hurt you, but you only have four cards to play with – and each card is actually a character.

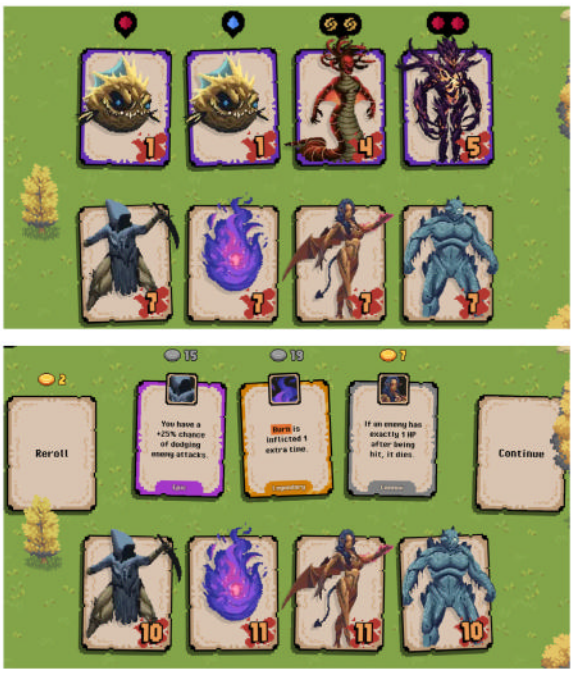
These characters adhere to basic archetypes in *Lowland Keepers*. One deals direct damage, one sets enemies alight, another steals enemy mana so you can buy a few extra goes during your turn. It's difficult to decide who to play during a turn, as the resources you use to play them are all shared between them. Sure, mana regenerates every turn, but you can also get more of it if you can kill enemies to snaffle their mana.

More than any other roguelike deckbuilder I've played, mana/energy is paramount here. It's split up into three resources, and each character uses one resource, or a combination. This is where the thief comes into their own, by stealing mana from enemies. And if you can buy an upgrade that deals damage as well – or stuns the enemy as it steals? This is when the fingers become steepled and the evil grin begins.

It's clear developer Two Tiny Dice has a couple of previous deckbuilders under its belt. You're forever weighing up the cost of using this character and expending this resource, even while the upgrades add game-changing abilities to your four varied characters. The wisp's burning effect now spreads to adjacent enemies! The cyclops now deals extra damage if it hits the monster on the right! This is a small but tactically rich card game. ■

84

BELOW: Kill an enemy to gain the mana overhead.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Two Tiny Dice	bit.ly/LowlandKeepers

GROUP TEST

EXTERNAL SSDs

Get up to speed with speedy external drives that let you carry your files around in style

By Jacob Fox

They might not be as flashy as graphics cards or gaming keyboards, but like a samurai's katana, a good, reliable external SSD can become an extension of yourself. And there are more uses for one than you might initially think.

The most obvious use for an external drive is to take your big files around with you. But they're also great to use as portable game library storage for handhelds and laptops. And even if you rarely travel, they can be useful for the occasional system backup or pre-Windows reinstall file backup.

They're not all similarly square, unassuming, no-nonsense external SSDs these days, either. In this group test we're looking at everything from such options to extravagant press-to-expand glass cannons and dinky keychain drives. And as you'll see from my testing, there's a lot of variability in performance, too.

crucial
by Micron
SAMSUNG
SAMSUNG
1 TB

X9 2 TB

CRUCIAL $229

Budget boss

1 After months of gradual price drops, the Crucial X9 is now a fantastic budget option. Sure, it's designed for an older USB 3.2 Gen 2x1 spec, but far more people will have USB ports running at this spec than faster ones, so it should be good enough for most, which is exactly what you want out of a budget drive.

Consistency is arguably just as important as maximum speed, anyway, and in this regard the X9 shines. In my testing I found it maintains 960+ MB/s speeds for over six minutes before speeds drop, which equals over 300 GB of data transferred in that time – more than enough for most purposes. It also works well as a drive to run games off, but you'll get slightly faster loading times out of a faster drive if you have the USB port to support it.

The X9 is also an incredibly practical drive. The simple, monochrome, square-shaped SSD with rounded edges is so unassuming that Crucial's even given it a lanyard slot, if having a drive dangling around your neck is your jam.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Consistent transfer speed
- → Cheap
- → No dust cover for USB-C

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / **USB GEN:** 3.2 GEN 2X1 / **RATED SPEED:** 1,050 MB/S

PD20 2 TB

TEAMGROUP $272

Truly portable

2 The TeamGroup PD20 would be the external SSD I'd go for if I was set on a truly portable drive. It might not have a lanyard slot like the Crucial X9, but it does have a hoop to fix a keychain. And there might be the odd drive that's slightly smaller, but none that has the hoop, the durability, and that 'sure, I don't mind getting this out in public' style. Portability isn't all about size, after all.

I could talk about how fast it is – and it can be incredibly fast, in bursts – but the main draw to this drive is just that it looks and feels so good and is so easy to carry around. Thanks to its USB-C port cover, IP54 dust and water resistance rating, and rubberised shell, you can feel comfortable taking it out and about with you.

It does have speed, too, of course. Not for sustained periods, admittedly – we can't expect that from such a portable drive – but it can transfer at over 1,700MB/s for about 30 seconds if it's plugged into a USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port. That's about 50GB, which is plenty for a portable little SSD.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Keychain hoop
- → USB-C dust/water cover
- → Speedy in 30-second bursts

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / **USB GEN:** 3.2 GEN 2X2 / **RATED SPEED:** 2,000 MB/S

ITS IN-HOUSE FLASH MEMORY AND CONTROLLER DELIVER VERY IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE

GROUP TEST

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

SD810 1 TB

ADATA **$133**

Stellar value

3 Out of all the external SSDs I've tested, this one is the best value for money. It's not the fastest out there – that's reserved for USB4 drives like the SE920 – but it's incredibly well-rounded and well-priced for what you're getting in the box.

And what you're getting is an external drive that delivers fast speeds for a pretty sustained period of time in a respectable little metal shell that has very good dust and water resistance, to boot. All for well shy of $140.

When I say fast, sustained transfer speeds, I mean almost two and a half minutes of 1,700+MB/s speeds when connected to a USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port. That's over 250GB of data transferred in just 2-3 minutes. It also matched or beat other more expensive drives, such as the Samsung T9, in game storage benchmarks, so it's a great choice for a game drive.

Throw in its excellent durability and diminutive size, and you have a seriously wonderful drive for the pretty cheap price of it. So the question to ask yourself is, do you really need anything faster?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Sustained transfer speeds
- Great dust/water protection
- Dust cover is stiff

SPECS **CAPACITY:** 500GB / 1TB (TESTED) / 2TB / 4TB / **USB GEN:** 3.2 GEN 2X2 / **RATED SPEED:** 2,000MB/S

T9 4 TB

SAMSUNG **$560**

Premium all over

4 The Samsung T9 is the external SSD that I personally choose to use, so of course I'm biased towards it, but that's just because it's such a lovely, premium drive. If you're not looking for something specific such as ultra portability and if you're not on a strict budget, the T9 is without a doubt the external drive I'd recommend.

The drive screams 'premium' in both look and feel. Its little bit of extra weight is technically a downside for portability, but boy is it satisfying to slap this thing on your desk with a thud as the rubberised casing successfully dampens the blow. It is portably sized, too, even if it's not the smallest drive – it slips easily into a pocket or bag compartment.

Its in-house flash memory and controller deliver very impressive performance, too, maintaining 1,700+MB/s transfer speeds for about a minute and a half before dropping. More importantly, though, after this it only drops to about 1,000MB/s. Most other similar drives drop well below this. I also had zero issues using it as a game drive, so it's a great all-rounder.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Consistently fast
- Gorgeous rubber casing
- Expensive

SPECS **CAPACITY:** 1TB / 2TB / 4TB (TESTED) / **USB GEN:** 3.2 GEN 2X2 / **RATED SPEED:** 2,000 MB/S

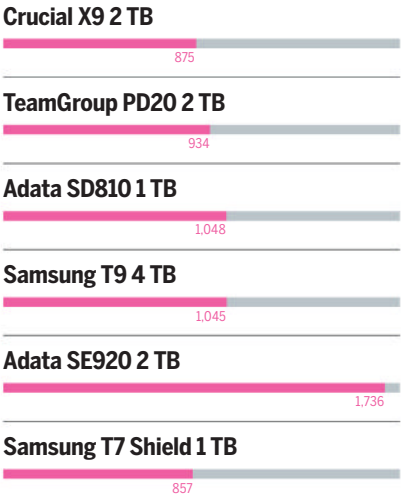
GROUP TEST

CAN ACHIEVE INCREDIBLY FAST SPEEDS OVER A USB4 CONNECTION

BENCHMARKS

3DMark Storage Index scores

These 3DMark Storage benchmark scores reflect how well the drives perform in real-world gaming scenarios, such as installing and loading games.



SE920 2 TB

ADATA **$399**

Glass cannon

5 The Adata SE920 is the glass cannon of SSDs. That's because it can achieve incredibly fast speeds over a USB4 connection but only if you enable on-drive write caching, which can increase the risk of data loss or corruption. It's not a massive risk if you're careful and your USB connection is solid, but it's not nothing either.

This thing really is fast though. If you have a USB4 port, you can achieve transfer speeds of above 3,700MB/s in bursts. I found the drive could stay above 2,600MB/s for over five minutes, transferring about 1TB of data in that time. Even when it dropped after that, it stayed at a very manageable 1,200+MB/s. The SE920 can achieve these impressive speeds in part thanks to its active cooling, which seems a little gimmicky but does help eke a little extra performance out of the scalding hot internals. To enable it you press down on the top edge and the drive expands and the fan turns on. Some people might like that, but it's a little too Buzz Lightyear for me. Still, there has to be a price to such unadulterated speed, I suppose.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Incredibly fast over USB4
- Requires on-drive write caching
- Expensive

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB (TESTED) / 4TB / **USB GEN:** USB4 / **RATED SPEED:** 3,800MB/S

T7 Shield 1 TB

SAMSUNG **$179**

Really rugged

6 The Samsung T7 Shield is aptly named, because it's designed to shield your data from your bumbling drops and dusty pockets. That's thanks not just to it being drop-proof up to three metres just like the T9 but also dust and water resistant with an IP65 rating. It doesn't have a USB-C cover like the SD810 does, so this protection must be occurring internally, inside the USB-C port. It might seem a little scary to not have an actual cover, but if it's got the rating it's been validated for it. It does feel the part, too, with decent heft and bouncy rubber casing like the more expensive T9 drive. It's also a very good performer, as far as a USB 3.2 Gen 2x1 drive goes. I found it to transfer at a very consistent 900+ MB/s throughout testing, with no dips at all. It performs relatively well as a game drive too, though you'll certainly get better performance out of a newer one such as the T9 or SD810 if you have a Gen 2x2 port. If that's your primary use case and you won't be travelling a lot, it might be worth skipping on the durability and opting for gaming speed.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Dust/water/drop protection
- 900+ MB/s transfer speeds
- Average gaming performance

SPECS CAPACITY: 1TB / 2TB / 4TB / **USB GEN:** USB 3.2 GEN 2X1 / **RATED SPEED:** 1,050 MB/S

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"I specced my half-orc for crossbows and imagined him as a bounty hunter"

Trying to go the distance past **BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION**

When I originally got into *Baldur's Gate* in high school, the first game was a dragon I never managed to slay. All those massive early game wilderness areas bored me to tears, impenetrable Advanced Dungeons & Dragons jargon wore down my spirit, and I was always worried that I was playing wrong or maybe committing to a character that'd fall apart when brought forward to *Shadows of Amn*.

Now I've got the opposite problem: I'm fresh off my third completion of *Baldur's Gate* in the past few years without ever having rolled credits on its sequel or Beamdog's 2016 interquel expansion *Siege of Dragonspear*. I've got high hopes for this latest run though: I love my character, I'm still feeling the magic, and I think I've got the juice to commit a significant portion of my free time this year to some Infinity Engine roleplaying.

TED LITCHFIELD

THIS MONTH
Got my Ranger on in flagrant violation of AD&D regulations.

ALSO PLAYED
Avowed, Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

ORC MODE

This go-round, I turned once again to *Baldur's Gate*'s surprisingly robust mod scene for some help. Nothing crazy, just some quality of life stuff and a crucial removal of some of the OG *Baldur's Gate*'s puritanical AD&D restrictions on class/race combinations. That let me make the half-orc archer ranger I was really jonesin' for – a strictly worse choice than an elf mechanically, but I think I should be allowed to make these choices in the privacy of my own home without the revenant of TSR wagging its finger at me.

Received wisdom is that ranged characters shred in *Baldur's Gate* before falling off hard in the sequel, but that's only true to a point. I let anxiety about this psych me out of a furtive archer run back in the day that had actually been going pretty well, but this time I was more mentally fortified. The ranger's archer subclass gets a mix of high proficiency caps and levelled damage

TOP: They got buildings inside their buildings in Baldur's Gate.

THE RANGER'S ARCHER SUBCLASS GETS A MIX OF HIGH PROFICIENCY CAPS

upgrades that can keep them competitive with melee warriors into the late game, while good weapon selection elevates them into the highest tiers of Infinity Engine DPSers well past their supposed expiration date. With *Baldur's Gate II*'s mondo-overpowered Firetooth crossbow in mind from the jump, I specced my half-orc for crossbows and imagined him as some kind of bounty hunter sniper type of guy.

My second playthrough on Core rules went smoother than the first, but on this third run I spanked once-imposing bosses on their wee bottoms and sent them running home to mama. The Army Scythe light crossbow purchasable in Beregost wound up being my go-to weapon for the entire game, and I had a crew consisting of Imoen, Viconia, Kagain, Edwin and Coran.

I've had to take a break from my campaign after cutting down Sarevok due to 2025's deluge of first-quarter releases, but it feels like I'm going all the way this time: I'm going to beat *Siege of Dragonspear*, import my orc into *Shadows of Amn* and *Throne of Bhaal*, romance Viconia and pretend all that stuff with her in *Baldur's Gate III* was just some other drow lady. This is my solemn oath as a gamer. ■

Avowed starts with a Twelfth Night-style shipwreck.

"I know this world"

Feeling at home in AVOWED

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Bested a large number of spiders. One was called Jeff.

ALSO PLAYED
Monster Hunter Wilds, Indiana Jones and the Great Circle

One of the things I'd somehow overlooked with *Avowed* is that it is set in the same universe as Obsidian's *Pillars of Eternity* series. I was aware of this information at least on some level, with an echo rattling around in the back of my skull, but I think I'd relegated it to my mind's forgotten realms due to the fact that, really, *Avowed*'s marketing had not leaned into it in any major way. And I felt that lack of push pointed to a game that, while technically based in the same universe, would move away from it and its deep lore in order to chase a more mass-market audience.

So, when I finally jumped into *Avowed* to see how Obisidan's not-*Skyrim* new *Skyrim* game actually played, and found that it didn't just dip its toe into the world of Eora but embraced it 100%, with its entire story deeply rooted in its lore, I was surprised. I was also immediately imbued with a sense of belonging, like I was going home, as after spending hundreds of hours adventuring in its world through *Pillars of Eternity* and *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire*, I was hit consistently with a deep feeling of, "I know this world."

GODS AND MONSTERS

So when NPCs speak of The Wheel or the pantheon of 12 gods, including Berath, Woedica, Magran and Ondra, or I read references to Dyrwood or the White March, before engaging in debate over the morality and standing of the Valian Trading Company, I have an innate knowledge that elevates the *Avowed* experience.

And, being candid, that's a good thing. As I feel it has helped smooth over some of my other niggles with *Avowed*. I love the visceral feeling of the combat, the beautiful Unreal Engine 5 graphics and, in the main, the thought-provoking writing, but I've been put off by not only how dead the world feels and how little reactivity there is in it, but how rough and ready some of its animations are, and how wooden characters can come across in dialogue. Here's hoping Microsoft keeps the *Avowed* dev team together, then, as with a few more years of improvements and, hopefully, expansion packs, it could truly become a great, narrative-focused fantasy RPG. ■

"Ode to Castlevania is basically a Belmont Matryoshka doll"

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS: ODE TO CASTLEVANIA makes up for the series' barren years

How many whips can a single videogame contain? We might need to hold an intervention for *Vampire Survivors* developer poncle, because the *Ode to Castlevania* DLC contains, by my count, at least eight whips – and that's on top of the ones already kicking around the base game!

It's the best kind of excessive. *Vampire Survivors*' theming was already Legally Distinct *Castlevania*, so it makes sense that its approach to becoming Legally *Castlevania* was to stuff a truly ludicrous amount of vampire-killing paraphernalia into a £3 package. I've played more than ten hours of the DLC and am still unlocking Belmonts, their descendants, and their whips, tomes, spears, and swords of choice. Before exploring the new *Castlevania* stage I assumed it would just be a simple backdrop for the usual mostly aimless roaming of *Vampire Survivors* while weaving between hordes, but the castle is almost shockingly intricate. Progress gated behind boss fights, dangerous choke points, hidden items, a wild encounter that shifts from overhead 2D to sidescrolling 2D and warps my brain every time.

WES FENLON

THIS MONTH
Pulverised 2,346 Bone Golems (and counting).

ALSO PLAYED
Dead Cells: Return to Castlevania

It's an endless stream of *Castlevania*ness, which is exactly what I wanted; the thing that got me to give in to the timesuck I knew *Vampire Survivors* would be, even. After Castlevania: Nocturne's second season wrapped up on Netflix I didn't want to stop spending time in that world, and *Vampire Survivors*' Steam Remote Play Together support edged out the idea of replaying one of the singleplayer *Castlevania*s for the nth time. Has there ever been a better half-pay-attention-while-you're-chatting game than this one?

IT'S AN ENDLESS STREAM OF CASTLEVANIANESS, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED

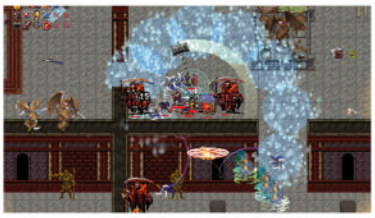
LECARDES ON THE TABLE

The real delight of *Ode to Castlevania* has been seeing the deep cuts pop up and then pass through the roguelike empowerment matrix. Did you know that Soma Cruz, star of 2005's *Dawn of Sorrow*, could acquire an RPG in that game? The explosive kind, not the roleplaying kind. I sure didn't until I unlocked it in *Vampire Survivors* by evolving his pretty decent starting weapon, the hand grenade, into a rocket launcher that destroys monster hordes.

Ode to *Castlevania* is basically a Belmont Matryoshka doll, with Richter the tiniest one at the centre. The most iconic of the bunch is the key to defeating Dracula, but before you get him you have to unlock everyone he's ever met. Forget about the more intricate maps of Konami's games and you've basically got the gist of Metroidvania item progression right here, transposed onto a game about blasting one billion dudes.

Forget the intervention. Call me crazy, but heck... maybe it could still use just a few more whips. ■

Tomes like Gale Force can cover the entire screen with magic when powered up.



BELOW: After playing through so many handheld *Castlevania*s, I'd recognise these sprites anywhere.

Even if you find gold the rolls might not be on your side.

"You'll find groups of like-minded people on party finder to join up with"

Looking for treasure and good times in FINAL FANTASY XIV

A few months ago I got together with some friends in *FFXIV* and went hunting for treasure. It was silly and chaotic with surprise enemies, golden llamas and bad luck barring our paths, but it made for one hell of an evening. Raiding is fun, but there's nothing quite like the unpredictable nature of hunting down treasure maps and praying for magic portals. I wanted to recreate that night, but with none of my friends around I decided to wing it with some strangers, what could go wrong?

Treasure maps are one of *FFXIV*'s many pieces of side content with new versions added every expansion for parties of up to eight players, though you can usually get through them with four or five of you. You'll need to find a map first by chopping down trees, whacking rocks or fishing them out of a body of water as one of the game's gathering classes, because of course that's where you'd find them. And that's where the trouble starts – you also need to decipher it and compare your map scrap to bigger ones to find the right spot to dig, and then you'll need to cross your fingers and hope a portal appears to whisk you away to a gil-filled utopia of loot.

With so many potential riches on offer you'll regularly find groups of like minded people on party finder to join up with and share in the bounty. With my recent escapades fresh in my memory I joined a group with friendly smiles and excited exclamation marks. Silence.

DANIELLA LUCAS

THIS MONTH
Looked for treasure, found logs instead

ALSO PLAYED
Infinity Nikki, Mail Time

YOU'LL NEED TO FIND A MAP FIRST BY CHOPPING DOWN TREES

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES

Hoping we just needed some time to warm up, I opened my first map and pitched in the coordinates as everyone else did the same. What followed was a quiet and very efficient train of teleporting to each spot and quietly fighting enemies until we got our first portal.

With golden monsters popping up mid-fight to dish out even more gil, it was raining cash and rare materia, but I still felt like I had done poorly. The quick-fire efficiency of treasure hunting with strangers is great for building up fat stacks, but it feels cold without the camaraderie.

On our 18th and final map things finally started to look up. We managed to pick the right doors and reach the final, golden floor. We worked hard to down a shiny chameleon and netted an 100,000 gil each. GGs all round and even a dance emote or two from the group before leaving and disbanding.

Turns out the real treasure was not the friends I made along the way, it was the resale price of all the lumber I picked up. ■

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Turtling is now valid for Warhammer's dwarfs. *By Jody Macgregor*

My dwarf campaign in the original *Total War: Warhammer* ended up being a little short (I'm getting the obvious height-related joke out of the way quick as I can there). Orcs drove me back to the stronghold of Karaz-a-Karak where I fought a siege, heroically outnumbered. Although I won against the odds, I stopped there. The idea of expanding again, reclaiming all those lost holds, seemed out of character. The dwarfish thing to do would be to squat here for a few centuries. Really stew on our grudges, you know?

An update to the dwarfs in *Total War: Warhammer III* has made that playstyle possible. Unlock a building tree called The Deeps in one of your holds and you find a wealth of options that reward you for keeping your empire tidy and putting all your effort into building up a limited number of provinces rather than spreading messily across the map. Now, dwarfs have the option of playing tall instead of wide (I shouldn't have used my short joke up in the first paragraph).

TURTLE POWER

The Deeps are expensive enough to be a midgame option, though. At 9,000 gold crowns just to open the entrance, which seems a bit much for what is essentially a door, you want to have your economy up and running before you even think of delving too greedily. I'm playing as Belegar Ironhand, who has a bespoke objective of reclaiming Karak Eight Peaks to be getting on with anyway. It's like being Thorin Oakenshield from The Hobbit only instead of a dragon there's an army of orcs led by Morglum Backstabba holed up in my home, putting their dirty boots all over the furniture. Taking it back should give me something to do before I get The Deeps project underway, and Karak Eight Peaks will be a perfect place to explore them once I do.

Of course, while I'm besieging orcs in the east, I end up in a war with pirates in the west, then have to deal with a clan of skaven as well. Being embroiled in constant war turns out to be fine actually, because it means I'm constantly clearing grudges. This numerical indicator of how much historic beef I have with any given settlement makes attacking them worthwhile because periodically an Age of Reckoning comes along with a bunch of rewards based on how many grudge points I've got. Battles are also an opportunity to earn oathgold, a research currency I could have earned with the right buildings, only instead of those I was busy cranking out the ones that give me the gold I need for The Deeps instead.

Once I've killed skaven warlord Queek Headtaker a few times, I open The Deeps at last, then beeline for an upgrade called Ornate Guild Foundries to increase Karak Eight Peaks' income by 5% for each turn count. That's "turn count" from the start of the game, meaning that by turn 20 it's a 100% bonus to this settlement's income, and it goes up from there. Balancing that is a 5% penalty for each settlement I own, which incentivises turtling like I did in my first dwarf campaign. Only by the time I've unlocked this I've already taken over various holds that belonged to goblins and skaven (I razed the pirate settlements though, which means a bunch of elves moved in to rebuild and now we're fractious neighbours in a 1970s sitcom).

So instead of turtling I just keep expanding, taking on the Chaos dwarfs next. I can afford more troops because The Deeps also give me a significant reduction to the cost of recruitment, and I've spent some of my grudges to confederate with Grombrindal, a dwarf lord who adds a stacking reduction to recruitment cost. I'm basically getting money for nothing and my dwarfs for free.

The strength of *Total War: Warhammer* has always been that each faction feels different enough to be worth replaying, and updates like this differentiate them even more. That said, even currencies like the dwarfs' oathgold and grudges, trackers like the Age of Reckoning clock, and rewards like The Deeps don't stop siege battles from feeling samey by the time you hit turn 100. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 17, 2022	**DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega	**LINK** totalwar.com

DWARFISH DUOLINGO

Talk to me in Khazalid

1 CHUF Old cheese kept under a hat for emergencies.

2 SKRUFF Scrawny beard, one of Khazalid's worst insults.

3 AZ A war axe, as opposed to an axe for domestic use.

4 GINIT A small rock that ends up in your boot somehow.

5 RUTZ Loose bowels following overconsumption of ale.

EMBROILED IN CONSTANT WAR TURNS OUT TO BE FINE ACTUALLY

Where's Wally?

ABOVE: This corner of the mountains will be my home for the next 80 turns or so.

LEFT: Faces only a mother could love.

The pirate queen rides a giant crustacean.

GET STARTED IN

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

Slay your way across the Forbidden Lands. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
30 hours

I CHOOSE YOU

1 Working out exactly which weapon you're going to use to smack monsters in *Wilds* is tricky. For speed, try Dual Blades or Insect Glaive. For big hits, Hammer or Greatsword. And for more defensive play, use Lance, Gunlance, or Sword and Shield.

DODGY HUNTER

2 One of the first things to learn in *Wilds* is how to evade monsters, especially if you're not using a big weapon that can parry or guard. Dodging is all about timing, but you can buff its distance and invulnerability by wearing armour with the Evade Extender.

FOCUS UP

3 As with Wirebugs in *Monster Hunter Rise*, Focus Mode is the new combat mechanic introduced in *Wilds*. It's pretty simple – you whack monsters until glowing red wounds appear on them, then use a Focus Strike to break said wound, granting you an extra material.

STAY SHARP

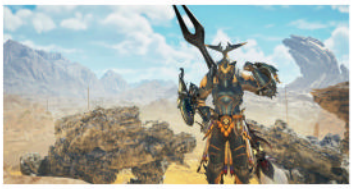
4 Keeping your weapon sharp is another way to maintain optimal damage. Try to sharpen while your Seikret is pursuing monsters between each area. Different weapons have different sharpness gauges, so keep an eye out as you upgrade.

STUFF YOUR FACE

5 Another necessary pre-hunt ritual is eating a meal for buffs. Sadly, the Palicos no longer cater for you, but you can cook food in your tent using rations and grill a steak to eat on the move using the BBQ grill in your items.

ARMED AND ARMOURED

6 One surefire way to make hunts easier is to upgrade your gear with Gemma the smithy, and pay attention to equipment skills. Take some time to determine what fits with your playstyle and pay attention to set bonuses.



SLAY ON THE RUNWAY

7 While *Wilds* does have armour transmog, it isn't available until you reach high rank. You can't even alter armour pigment early like you could in *Monster Hunter Rise*, so you'll have to cope wearing a complete mismatch of gear until you've completed the story.

ON THE HUNT *Build your monster-slaying specialist*

1
GET GEARED
Weapons come with preset skills in *Wilds*, but you can insert decorations to add others if they have decoration slots.
2
MONSTERPROOF
Armour is your primary source of skills in *Wilds*, especially if you choose sets with decoration slots and insert skill jewels.
3
FELYNE FRIEND
Upgrading your Palico will help a lot during hunts. Craft your cat better gear with Gemma, and consider giving them a paralysis weapon.

BONE TO PICK

8 When you arrive in each new region in *Wilds*, your first priority should be to harvest mining outcrops, bone piles and to slay and skin smaller monsters. Collecting these materials will often reveal new weapons and armour sets that you can craft with Gemma the smithy.

IN YOUR ELEMENT

9 As you forge new weapons, you'll also want to pay attention to elemental damage and status effects. If you peruse the monster handbook, you can see specific monster weaknesses for those you've slain. I'd recommend something universal like paralysis.

TREACHEROUS TERRAIN

10 Smacking flashflies will blind monsters, but you can also pull down vine traps, drop boulders on top of them, or even smash dark hornet nests, causing swarms to attack. Be aware of how your grappling hook can cause some mid-hunt mischief.

SNACK TIME

11 If you're still struggling with hunts, consider crafting and consuming items. Armorskins, Demon Drugs, Hardshell Powder and Demon Powder, , all offer buffs to attack and defence. Wolfing down a few of these powerful consumables will help level the field.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

12 You can trade with certain villagers in *Wilds*. In high rank, you'll also be able to complete quests in each village and unlock villagers gathering items for you. These mechanics are how you access the game's secret armour sets.

THE TIMED BLOCK

Choose the right moment, and you can topple gods. *By Harvey Randall*

RIGHT: *Sekiro*'s blueprint was so good, even Star Wars started working with it.

I finished *Nine Sols* just before 2024 ended – and I'm glad I did, because it's one of my favourite games of the year. Partially because of its gorgeous art direction, solid story, and exceptional fight design. But also because it happens to be following a trend that is downright pleasing to me: the Soulslike genre is looking a whole lot more Sekirolike, lately.

In case you missed FromSoftware's masterwork, here's a basic explanation. In *Sekiro*, your objective isn't just to reduce your enemy's health bar to zero – it's to break their posture. To do so, you need to apply damage to it. Taking chips off their health will accomplish this, but the real name of the game is timing your blocks just-so. The window to pull one off is far more forgiving than the all-or-nothing parries of past *Souls* games, and the reward for doing so is proportionately smaller.

Sekiro is sometimes described as a rhythm game in a trenchcoat, and that's pretty accurate. When you settle into the much yearned-for flow state, you can find yourself tapping that block button like one might bang a drum. But I actually don't really like rhythm games – and yet, I adore a good Sekirolike. Why is that? Well, I've got a couple of ideas.

THE ART OF THE DUEL

Some of FromSoftware's best boss fights have been its duels. These are bosses that help you feel as if you are on even footing with your opponent – entering an arena not with an insurmountable wall of flesh, but with a rival. The key to these is partly just aesthetic, but it's also the feeling of trading blows.

There's an intangible neurological glee I get when I walk into a boss room, get flattened by an inscrutable chain of sword-swings and then – little by little – start to download them. It's like The Matrix, if the Matrix suffered a terribly slow AOL-era landline connection. It's gotten to the point where I don't even care about beating the boss, I just want that sense of mastery.

Nine Sols expanded on this with the Unbounded Counter: you need to pre-emptively hold down the block button to charge it, and then release at the right moment. The catch being, you can only charge it for so long before you whiff your defence entirely. Succeed, though, and you'll send your foe reeling, no matter how big their blow is. Which leads me to the other half of the coin of my love for this mechanic – because some games let you parry anything.

In my mind, the timed block and the parry are the closest a game can get to that feeling of toppling a giant. In contrast to the idea of a duel, this benefit of the timed block is a seemingly infinite suspension of disbelief that we have for parrying when we're behind the wheel.

If I was asked to believe that a small robot deflected a giant's building-sized fist by raising their own at the right time in a TV show, I'd roll my eyes. In *Ultrakill*, though, the feat of batting away The Corpse of King Minos' giga-swings with nothing but your spindly synthetic arm is rad as hell. OK, I might cheer for that on the silver screen too, but the point is I'd require worldbuilding and setup for it. V1 doesn't need Chekhov's gun, he just does it.

Personally, I think the timed block is the future of Soulslike games. It just unlocks so many possibilities, combining so satisfyingly with so many elements of your average Soulslike, that I'm surprised *Elden Ring* didn't have it. Let me tap my way through Malenia's Waterfowl Dance, Hidetaka Miyazaki. I promise it'll be cool as hell. ■

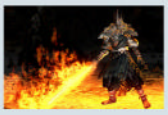
YOU NEED TO PRE-EMPTIVELY HOLD DOWN THE BLOCK BUTTON TO CHARGE IT

NEED TO KNOW

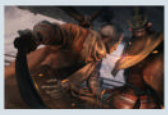
RELEASE 22 March, 2019	**DEVELOPER** FromSoftware
PUBLISHER Activision	**LINK** shorturl.at/EJsrI

COUSINS OF THE TIMED BLOCK

Know your hist-parry

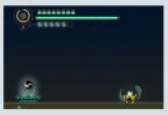


THE PARRY
You get a very small window to pull this off, but when you do, time stands still. Your foe crumples to their knees with an appropriate 'you're screwed' noise. Poor Gwyn never stood a chance.



THE MIKIRI/ JUMP
Sekiro's Mikiri and Jump attacks are, in essence, a timed block – they just require you to hit a different button. I will never tire of stomping on some fool's sword.

THE BACKSTEP
The midpoint between a parry and a dodge roll, a backstep demands discipline over your movement. The reward? Feeling like Neo from The Matrix as played by Keanu Reeves, but better.



THE UNBOUND COUNTER
My favourite new addition, *Nine Sols*' Unbound Counter makes you feel like a spring-coiled genius, especially since it works on regular attacks, too. The skill ceiling is in orbit.

FAR RIGHT: Yeah. I can probably parry that.

THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This issue's case: **THE BIG SLI**

Despite her tiny frame, Vivienne now swung the warhammer towards me with a vicious, uncontrolled rage. "You just couldn't play nice, could you Ray-Tracing! All you had to do was put that cretinous console-loving pretender Stanley behind bars, but no, the famous Dick Ray-Tracing had to poke and pry until he took the glory." As another strike missed me by inches, I caught sight of Anna and Carmen bolting toward the warehouse's entrance but, faced with armed police storming in, changed tack and, in a panic, sprinted towards the windows extending down the building's western wall.

"Stop! Armed police! We will fire," cracked out over a police megaphone, but neither women halted and, as Vivienne finally caught me across the collar bone with the warhammer, knocking me off my feet and onto the mortuary slab-cold floor, the shots rang out like nails being banged into a coffin. Stunned by the blow, I just managed to catch Anna and Carmen half-run, half-stumble into the window panes, collapsing through them and causing glass to rain down in a cacophonous shower. Vivienne, now standing over me warhammer raised, then snarled, "That Royal Dragon Mount should have been ours! Fantasy Crown will never be the same without us! But, you'll never live to see it, Dick, as now you die. Say hello to the ferryman for me, Ray-Tracing, as I'll be seeing him soon." But, just as Vivienne swung the warhammer down for the killing blow, Brody dived in out of left field and tackled her to the ground. "It's over Viv. I won't let you hurt anyone else," Brody gasped. "I'm abdicating as King."

As Vivienne, Carmen, and Anna were led away to the waiting paddy wagon, the former handcuffed, the latter two shot but stabilised on medical stretchers, I lit a cigarette while trying to come to terms with the dark heart of this case. A man was now dead and three women had booked a lifetime ticket to Sing Sing, and for what? What did it matter what virtual items your in-game character had when a live service game was inevitably, finally shuttered? The game was dead, and your avatar in it was now sleeping the big sleep. Legendary and common items were the same as wind and air to you now. These virtual heroes just slept the big sleep, not caring about how the game died, and taking all that real-world financial and time investment by you with them. "Had any of it ever meant a damn thing?" I asked myself, turning to crump off through the ankle-deep snow to the nearest bar, "Or like my first encounter with Anna, had it all simply been a dream, one masking a painful, dark reality?"

CASE CLOSED

...UNTIL JUNE 30

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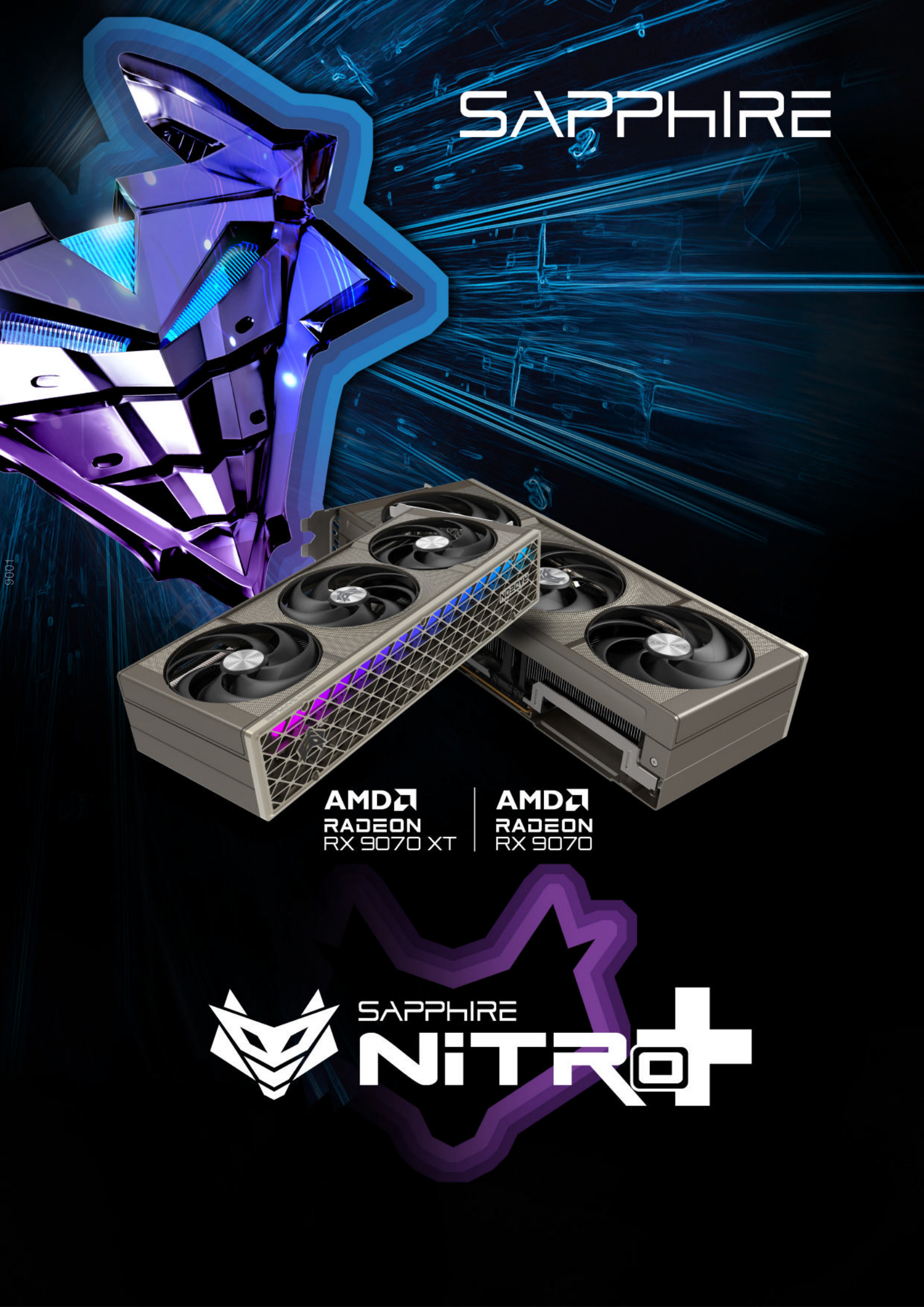
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